

**The benefits of peer support for online learners**

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years the increased availability of online postgraduate papers has attracted a diverse range of learners. Many learners, due to their physical location, family or employment commitments, are unable to enrol in an on-campus paper. Online learners can experience feelings of isolation from other class members, the lecturer, learning community and the wider university. Peer support is a voluntary partnership where learners provide each other with informal feedback, encouragement and/or engage in discussions about the content of their paper. It has the potential to provide a layer of support for learners, in addition to that already available from the lecturer or the university.

A qualitative design was used to explore the research question: How does peer support benefit online learners? Two sub-questions were also addressed: (1) What issues do peer support partners face? and (2) In what ways does peer support meet partners' needs? Six participants worked with a partner, known as their 'study buddy' for one university semester. Data from two focus group interviews, individual interviews, diaries and/or contact charts and a questionnaire was presented in three case studies.

This study showed that participants benefited from using peer support. They jointly constructed knowledge, gave and received scaffolding that helped them clarify their ideas and had access to another perspective about the paper content. Some of the issues participants faced during their learning, such as finding information about assessment requirements were resolved through interaction with a peer support partner. The results suggested that peer support partnerships were effective when participants received feedback, advice, encouragement and answers to their questions. They appreciated having another learner who was able to provide support for them during their academic study.

It would be valuable to investigate whether the patterns emerging from this study were similar for other online learners in different courses and universities.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

This introduction provides an overview, in three sections, of my thesis. Firstly, Focus of inquiry introduces the topic, describes the purpose of this study and identifies the main issues that were explored. Secondly, Timeline describes the main research procedures and timings. Thirdly, Structure of the thesis introduces the six chapters as the key components which frame this study.

#### **Focus of inquiry**

The purpose of this study was to explore if postgraduate online learners benefit from using peer support. The number and range of online courses is steadily increasing as universities draw on the internet to attract a diverse range of learners from varied locations across the globe (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Picciano, 2002). Studies have shown that the flexibility and autonomy of online learning allows learners to continue with full or part-time employment as well as cope with their personal and/or family commitments while they study (Bourn & Bootle, 2005; Lee & Gibson, 2003; Moller, 1998; Picciano, 2002; Wiesenber, 2001). On-campus learners may interact face-to-face with colleagues before, during or after class while online learners, without this same opportunity, often feel isolated from others in their paper (Abrami & Bures, 1996; Dzakiria, 2008; Lake, 1999; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Researchers internationally (e.g. Bourn & Bootle, 2005; Conrad, 2008; Dzakiria, 2008; Lake, 1999; Wheeler, 2006) have reported that this issue may be addressed by providing support to ensure that online learners have a positive educational experience. Mills (2003) noted that support provided by the university meets some online learners' needs through course and/or career advice, study skill workshops and general administration information.

Mentoring and peer learning are two formal programmes often used by lecturers to support learners (Keppell, Au, Ma, & Chan, 2006; Zachary, 2000). A mentoring programme involves an expert and a novice working together in a learning relationship (Zachary, 2000). With peer

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learning however, there is often a group of learners who co-operate to complete an assessment task (McLuckie & Topping, 2004; Ng, 2008). By way of contrast, peer support is an informal approach where learners may receive guidance in addition to the support already provided by the lecturer and the university (Mills, 2003; Phillips, 2003; Rowntree, 1994).

According to Vygotsky (1978) learning takes place during interaction with others and for that reason, online lecturers often consider techniques to encourage learners to build social connections with members of their class. Peer support may enhance interaction and the opportunity for learning with another class member (Cain, Marrara, Pitre & Armour, 2003). When a learner contacts their peer support partner with a question or concerns this learner is usually able to provide support (Cain et al., 2003; Keppell et al., 2006). The reciprocal nature of peer support indicates that there are likely benefits for both learners during this process (Keppell et al., 2006; Topping, 2005).

I was interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the theoretical and practical aspects in this field and selected the topic of peer support to investigate within the context of online learning. My purpose was to uncover the benefits of peer support and provide recommendations for improving the online experience for future learners. This study focussed on answering the following research question ‘How does peer support benefit online learners?’ Two sub questions were also highlighted with ‘What issues do peer support partners face?’ and ‘In what ways does peer support meet partners’ needs?’

### **Timeline**

This study was based on a research proposal accepted in January 2008 and the research took place from February 2008 to June 2010. It occurred in three stages as follows:

1. Data collection completed September 2008
2. The integration of data in case studies completed October 2009
3. Thesis completed June 2010

**Structure of the thesis**

My thesis consists of six chapters. In Chapter One the Introduction presents an overview of the study including the focus of inquiry, timeline and the structure of the thesis. In the next chapter, the Literature Review describes the theoretical framework that supports this study and explains my decision for selecting this topic. Chapter Three, Methodology includes the research design and data collection methods. The Results chapter uses case studies to introduce participants and describe their experiences. Chapter Five discusses the results in relation to the literature and my research question. The final chapter summarises the results, makes recommendations for future research and acknowledges the limitations of this study.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

This chapter begins with an explanation of social constructivism which is the theoretical framework underpinning my research. Key terminology that underpins social constructivism is explained in this section. Following on from this, the characteristics of an online learning environment are described. Discussion then turns to identifying the issues faced by online learners and their needs before describing two programmes lecturers can adopt to support learners. This chapter concludes with a discussion about peer support and the present study.

#### **Social constructivist learning**

Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist learning theory, with its emphasis on discourse, is the theoretical framework that underpins this study. Eun (2008) described social constructivism as a theory about "cognitive development, or acquiring higher mental function [which] is only possible through the social interaction between or among people that ultimately leads to internalization by the individual" (p. 136). Primary characteristics of social constructivist learning theory are described below to provide the reader with an understanding of the context for this study.

#### *Prior knowledge & multiple perspectives*

Each learner brings different experiences and prior knowledge to learning and during discussion with others they learn about a particular topic from a different perspective (Vygotsky, 1978). There are multiple pathways to constructing knowledge and although learners may be exposed to the same material, they create meaning in different ways depending on their prior knowledge (Tam, 2000). Each learner personalises and internalises this knowledge in order to meet his or her learning goals (Vygotsky, 1978). In a class, the diverse range of learners and their multiple perspectives about the course content enhance the construction of knowledge for all learners (Doolittle, 1999).

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### *Scaffolding*

Vygotsky (1978) believed that, to begin with, learners require scaffolding in order to achieve their goals but with support and encouragement they later complete the same or similar tasks independently. Scaffolding therefore, should be tailored to match a learner's individual needs at a particular point in the learning process (Doolittle, 1999). On occasion, when learners have the opportunity to discuss their ideas with others this can also be a scaffolding experience (McLoughlin & Marshall, 2000; Murphy, 1997). A more capable other, such as the teacher or another learner, may provide scaffolding and then the learner moves into a position where they develop skills to experience success alone (Vygotsky, 1978). Pritchard (2005) identified several approaches to scaffold learners. They included demonstration, supported access to a range of learning resources and the opportunity for learners to practice (Pritchard, 2005).

### *Zone of proximal development*

The gap between what a learner achieves alone and what is achieved with the help of a more experienced other was described by Vygotsky (1978) as the zone of proximal development (Z.P.D). According to Pritchard (2005), the Z.P.D. is the "theoretical space of understanding" (p. 31). He reinforced Vygotsky's premise, that the Z.P.D. does not physically exist but it is embedded within the learning process. For the more experienced learner, these opportunities to scaffold another learner to problem solve and to achieve personal goals, contribute to the learning process (Eun, 2008). A learning goal is usually only slightly beyond a learner's current skill level and it is the scaffolding which makes the difference (Vygotsky, 1978). Murphy (1997) reported that functioning in the Z.P.D. allows a learner to achieve "at the cutting edge of their individual development" (p. 3). Pritchard also noted that the Z.P.D. cannot be predicted in a particular learning session, as the requirement and timing for scaffolding, is an individual consideration.

### *Discourse*

In social constructivism discourse involves learners actively participating, debating and challenging others' perspectives in a focussed discussion (McLoughlin & Marshall, 2000; Pritchard, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Discourse provides the opportunity for learners to explain their ideas, clarify their thinking, build on their understanding and reflect on their learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Murphy (1997) reported that facilitating a social constructivist environment includes using authentic learning contexts and encouraging personal goal setting

so that learners are actively involved in the learning process. Knowledge construction rather than restating information is emphasised and the opportunity to work with other learners in a social setting is preferable to working alone (Murphy, 1997). Although learning is a unique achievement it develops best through discourse with others (Doolittle, 1999).

### *Summary*

An optimal social constructivist learning environment develops when learners build on their prior knowledge, access the diverse perspectives of other learners and take an active role in their learning. They use discourse to jointly construct meaning and when there is a problem to solve, receive scaffolding within their Z.P.D. by more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978). There are many examples of learning activities and papers, in both the on-campus and online environments, that are designed to use the principles of social constructivism. They include group tasks, activating learners' prior knowledge at the beginning of a new topic, encouraging learners to set learning goals, engaging learners in problem solving tasks, and providing opportunity for learners to work at their own pace. Social constructivism was selected as the theoretical framework for this study because the online paper participants were enrolled in, used social constructivist principles.

### **Online learning**

Online learners may be in the same city, country or in an international setting, but their communication with the lecturer and/or other learners in their paper is via the internet (Moore, 1989; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Tam, 2000). Like on-campus learning, learners select online learning for a range of reasons, including completing university study, upgrading qualifications, interest or perhaps a change of vocation (Lake, 1999). Research has shown that many online learners find that the autonomy and flexibility of online learning suits their personal circumstances because the internet provides them with access to their paper, anytime and anywhere in the world (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Beldarrain 2006; Bernard, Rojo de Rubalcava & St-Pierre, 2000; Bourn & Bootle, 2005; Keppell et al., 2006). This flexibility of online learning has been reported to suit learners who are studying part-time while working full-time (Hudson, McCloud, Buhler, Cramer, Greer & Paugh, 1998; Lake, 1999; Picciano, 2002; Watts, Waraker & Ludda, 2008).

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### *Computer mediated communication*

The focal point of an online learning environment is often computer mediated communication (C.M.C.) and this is usually the main form of discourse in a paper. The learning process in C.M.C. involves learners and/or the lecturer extending or challenging ideas and views or beginning a new thread (a different aspect of the same topic) during discussion (Beldarrain, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Tam, 2000). This threaded discussion about a particular topic in the paper builds up over a set period of time and is described by Palloff and Pratt as “a *web of learning*” (p. 6) (italics in original).

Written text is often the tool for interaction in C.M.C. and it can be a scaffolding experience when learners give and/or receive guidance that clarifies, extends or confirms their ideas about the topic in question (Lapadat, 2002; Rovai, 2004). This opportunity for learners to negotiate and jointly construct knowledge with others in their paper characterises Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivist learning theory. The more actively learners interact in C.M.C. the more likely they are to be empowered to take responsibility for their own learning (Beldarrain, 2006; Kim & Moore, 2005; Murphy, Mahoney, Chen, Mendoza-Diaz & Yang, 2005; Wang, Peng, Huang, Hou & Wang, 2008). Through their interactions in C.M.C. learners are likely to become self directed as they build or widen their knowledge about the content of their online paper (Lapadat, 2002; Wang et al., 2008).

C.M.C. can be synchronous or asynchronous or (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell & Haag, 1995). Synchronous communication is a form of real time communication where online learners interact together at a set time (Lapadat, 2002). In contrast, asynchronous C.M.C. is time delayed as learners do not need to access their paper at the same time as other members of their class (Lapadat, 2002). With the time delay there is also an opportunity for learners to reflect on their learning and the course material before they contribute their ideas to C.M.C. (Lapadat, 2002; Swan, 2002). Asynchronous C.M.C. affords individual learners freedom from the restraints of a lecture timetable whereas synchronous C.M.C. requires learners to set aside a certain time slot for their paper (Lapadat, 2002).

### *Interactions*

Lecturers often support online learners to achieve their individual educational goals by encouraging their interactions (Moore, 1989; Swan, 2002). Interactions are the messages or

contributions learners make to a discussion in C.M.C. and they are available for everyone in the paper to read and/or make a response. Three types of interaction that influence learning are identified as learner to content, learner to lecturer and learner to learner (Beldarrain, 2006; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Kim & Moore, 2005; Moore, 1989; Ouzts, 2006; Swan, 2002).

Moore (1989) described learner to content interactions as helpful when learners construct new knowledge and respond to the learning material. Learners interact with the content of their paper when they post their ideas about the current topic or question in C.M.C. Learner to lecturer interactions take place when the lecturer, as the expert, provides motivation, guidance and/or feedback to learners (Moore, 1989; Swan, 2002). During C.M.C. interactions, the lecturer scaffolds individual learners by recognising their Z.P.D and providing guidance for them (Moore, 1989; Murphy et al., 2005). The lecturer's role can vary throughout the paper as learner's individual requirements emerge and their contributions to C.M.C. develop (Rovai, 2004). The quality of C.M.C. interactions and the opportunity for individuals to stretch their thinking contributes to learning, motivation and satisfaction for individual learners (Ouzts, 2006; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rovai, 2004; Swan, 2002). In order to encourage interaction in C.M.C. the lecturer uses different types of responses to reply to, extend or challenge learners' contributions (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Dennen, 2005; Picciano, 2002). When the lecturer takes an active role in sustaining C.M.C. there is usually increased interaction and learner initiation of discussion topics which is the objective (Dennen, 2005). The third type of interaction Moore defined as learner to learner and it occurs with other class members during their interactions about the content of the paper. Moore and Swan reported that learner to learner interaction is important to learners themselves and it helps them to be actively involved in their learning. For example, Richardson and Swan found that "fifty nine percent of participants indicated interaction, feedback and other learners' perspectives and/or acknowledgement" (p. 77) were helpful to their learning. In a further example, Ouzts (2006) reported that her participants learnt "more from each other than from the text book" (p. 291). Her research indicated that nurturing learner to learner interactions in C.M.C. is advantageous to individual learners and others in the class.

A concern for lecturers is that learners often choose not to participate in C.M.C. This decision may restrict the range of perspectives available in any particular discussion as well as limiting

learning for the individual involved (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2004; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Encouraging learners in C.M.C. to read other learner's contributions and to provide their own ideas for discussion is important if lecturers want to ensure that learners have the richest online learning experiences (Dennen, 2005; Lapadat, 2002; Liu, Magjuka, Bonk & Lee, 2007; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Salmon, 2001). One way lecturers address this concern is with a participation grade for contributions to C.M.C. and this mark contributes to learners' overall assessment (Picciano, 2002; Rovai, 2004). According to Lapadat, Picciano (2002) and Rovai (2004) a positive outcome from using a participation grade is that the quality and depth of learners' C.M.C. interactions are enhanced.

When a learner does not receive a response to their C.M.C. contribution this experience often leads to feelings of disappointment (Dennen, 2005). Similarly, when a learner does not receive feedback, they are unaware that their contribution has even been read by others in their paper (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Rovai, 2007). It is both a strength and a weakness that the flexibility of C.M.C., allows learners to design their own learning pathway (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Lapadat, 2002). In C.M.C. learners decide which messages to reply to or when and if they want to post another idea (Anderson, 2004; Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Lapadat, 2002). Ouzts (2006) noted that when learner to learner interaction was high, her participants reported that they "really felt like a community of scholars" (p. 292). As can be seen then, C.M.C. interactions often help online learners experience a connection with other learners during their academic study.

### *Presence*

The interactions described above may contribute to a learner's sense of belonging and their feeling of presence in the learning community (Moore, 1989; Picciano, 2002; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 2001). Picciano noted that when online learners consider that they belong to their class (i.e. experience presence) and their learning community, they are more likely to interact in C.M.C. There are three aspects of presence which are described as cognitive, teaching and social and the feeling of presence may contribute to a positive online experience for learners (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Picciano, 2002; Rourke et al., 2001).

Cognitive presence refers to the depth and quality of the learning during interactions in C.M.C. when individual learners construct new knowledge (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes,

2005; Rourke et al., 2001). Teaching presence reflects the lecturer's content knowledge, their design of the paper, the facilitation of learning tasks and their encouragement for learners to interact (Rourke et al., 2001). The lecturer may scaffold learner contributions and challenge perspectives during interaction in C.M.C. and these strategies support the development of teaching presence (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Rourke et al., 2001). As learners develop a sense that they are part of the community, both socially and emotionally, they may also experience social presence (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Rourke et al., 2001). Social presence develops when trusting relationships are formed and quality interactions in C.M.C. are nurtured (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Social presence increases when learners allow others to recognise and get to know them as individuals and vice versa (Beldarrain, 2006; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). In spite of the limited opportunity to connect visually with others in an online paper, learners still project their personality and recognise the existence of class members (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). Learners may experience social presence when lecturers include a self-introductory session in their paper (Bernard et al., 2000; Lai, 1999; Tu & McIsaac, 2002; Tu & Corry, 2003). As lecturers welcome, guide and encourage newcomers to their paper they also demonstrate the social roles of interaction which may encourage learners' participation and their enjoyment of the learning experience (Brown, 2001; Rovai, 2002b; Selby & Ryba, 1999). These introductory discussions may later develop into informal social conversations because when learners feel connected to class members, they are also more likely to benefit from or offer support (Rovai, 2002b). An example of this experience was reported by Brown, when her participants noted that making connections with and knowing about other learners, helped them to interact with "real" people, not just text" (p. 30). In a further example, Bourn and Bootle (2005) found that eight of their twelve participants reported that a lack of contact with other class members for conversation, the sharing of experiences, the receiving of guidance and feedback proved to be a disadvantage for their academic study. It is therefore important to encourage learners to develop a feeling of presence in their learning community as this is likely to contribute to their overall educational experience.

### *Learning community*

A learning community is made up of the learners and the lecturer in an online paper and they have the opportunity to develop a connection with each other and share common goals (Brown, 2001; Ouzts, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2002a; Swan, 2002). Palloff and Pratt reported that a learning community has an educational focus as it "is the vehicle through

which learning occurs online” (p. 29). Learning is enhanced when learners and the lecturer contribute to and build their community when interact during discussion in C.M.C. (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2002b).

A learning community may be improved by ensuring that the learners (and the lecturer) find common ground and make early links with others in their paper (Brown, 2001; Cain et al., 2003). One reason to encourage learners to build their social connections is that it may help them to feel motivated and connected to their community (Brown, 2001; Liu et al., 2007; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2004; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Brown recommended that lecturers promote social connection and the building of the learning community by adopting her four level model. Her first level of community building encourages learners to make links with others who may have something in common with them such as location, background or a similar career path. Brown identified the next level as community conferment when learners interact with the course content and develop social presence. Finally, camaraderie takes place once learners have spent time building close relationships and maintaining positive interactions with others in their paper (Brown, 2001).

In contrast, it is possible that some learners do not experience a sense of belonging to their learning community even though they actively contribute to C.M.C. (Brown, 2001; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Picciano, 2002). These learners do not develop a sense of belonging to their learning community for a multitude of reasons including lack of interest, time, personal choice or simply the belief that face-to-face interaction is preferable (Brown, 2001). Research undertaken in New Zealand by Anderson (2004) however, reported that nurturing a sense of community amongst learners in an online paper contributed to their overall educational experience. His case study, which examined the diverse experiences of 20 teacher education learners, found that participants valued both the learning and affective support they received from their learning community. Anderson’s research differs from this present study because he did not arrange for his participants to provide support for a specific learner in their learning community.

#### *Online learners’ needs*

Lecturers’ motivation for addressing the needs of online learners is closely linked to their goal to ensure a positive learning experience (Wiesenberg, 2001). Many online lecturers recognise learners’ needs and use strategies to encourage full participation in their paper

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(Bourn & Bootle, 2005; Conrad, 2008; Dzakiria, 2008; Lake, 1999; Lee & Gibson, 2003; Wiesenberg, 2001; Wheeler, 2006). Wheeler argued that learner support “may be the most important issue affecting the success or failure of online learning” (p. 176). He reported that the course lecturer, the way a course is designed, software features and/or other learners can provide the necessary support. Similarly, Mills (2003) found that the appropriateness of the learner support services is central to the online experience. He suggested that these services should not simply be provided for learners on demand but be adapted to meet individual needs. Likewise, Phillips (2003) recommended that learner support be “both proactive and reactive” (p. 180) as, over time, she envisages it to be custom-made for each learner. In addition, Sinclair (2003) and Carnwell (2000) reported that learners should be encouraged to provide each other with support for academic, practical and emotional issues. Carnwell noted that online learners were likely to benefit from differing intensity and categories of support depending upon their individual needs. For the purpose of this study, these categories are described in further detail as they indicate some of the concerns or issues that online learners face. The three categories also relate to the types of presence as discussed above.

### **Academic support**

Academic support links directly to teaching presence and Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivism as it is the content of the paper that often presents challenges in terms of understanding for some learners. In such cases, online learners email their lecturer directly with an academic problem but often, the time it takes to receive a response when the lecturer is busy with other requests, proves to be a disadvantage (Bourn & Bootle, 2005; Cain et al., 2003; Dzakiria, 2008; Moller, 1998; Ouzts, 2006). Cain et al. reported that some of their graduate learners received their academic support from the lecturer while others found that class members in their learning community provided them with this guidance. Some researchers (e.g. Cain et al., 2003; Carnwell, 2000; Ouzts, 2006; Simpson, 2002; Wheeler, 2006) noted that learners value the contributions other learners make when they provide support in addition to the guidance received from their lecturer. In this study, I am arguing that it can be effective for learners to adopt peer support in order to supplement their lecturer’s academic advice and/or support.

### **Practical support**

Practical support often includes providing solutions for technical concerns such as logging on to the paper and locating course information because these issues are a barrier to learning

(Baggaley, 2008; McLeod & Barbara, 2005). McLoughlin and Marshall (2000) reported that online learners should be “empowered by the technology, [and] not overwhelmed by it” (p. 4). Familiarisation with the course management system may also be helpful for those learners who are new to the online environment. For example, McLeod and Barbara reported that 81% of their participants found it valuable to attend a chat room training session before this feature was introduced into their paper.

Other learners who provide practical advice and answer questions about technical issues often enhance their learner to learner interactions and motivation (Hudson et al., 1998; Moller, 1998; Wheeler, 2006). Another approach for solving practical issues is to provide adult-learner support with the technical help matching the varied study times of online learners (Cain et al., 2003; McLeod & Barbara, 2005; Moller, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Wiesenberg, 2001). The challenge therefore, is to solve technical issues early in a paper and to take full advantage of the software in order to ensure that learners remain central to the learning process (Beldarrain, 2006; Carnwell, 2000; Phillips, 2003; Wheeler, 2006).

### **Emotional support**

Online learners often experience emotional support when they share ideas, provide feedback and give or receive encouragement within their learning community (Anderson, 2004; Bourn & Bootle, 2005; Carnwell, 2000; Moller, 1998; Thompson & Ku, 2006). Emotional support received from family, friends and colleagues is also appreciated by online learners (Conrad, 2008; Hudson et al., 1998; Rowntree, 1994; Simpson, 2002; Wiesenberg, 2001). Cain’s et al.’s (2003) participants found that “some type of person-person contact was essential to having an enjoyable learning experience” (p. 51). Online papers that are designed to encourage social presence are likely to assist those learners who would like social and emotional support from other class members (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Simpson, 2002).

There are two features of the software (learner profiles and the social forum) that are designed to promote social presence and they also meet some learners’ needs to connect socially with others (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2004). Profiles introduced at the beginning of a paper provide an opportunity for learners to build or extend their social connections (Brown, 2001; Lake, 1999; McLuckie & Topping, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Another approach has profiles incorporated within a personal home-page or in a collaborative website such as a wiki where users read and/or add information as they make connections with each other (Augar,

Raitman & Zhou, 2004). Often when learners portray themselves as ‘real’ people, and are able to see others enrolled in their paper in much the same way, they experience presence and a sense of belonging to their learning community (Augur et al., 2004; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). In the paper of interest in this study, learners were encouraged to complete a learner profile and to read those prepared by other learners.

A social forum is also useful for building online relationships as it is an opportunity for learners to discuss any topics (course related or not) that would usually take place on-campus, after class or in other areas such as the student cafeteria (Moller, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2004; Tu & McIssac, 2002). Initially, the social forum can be facilitated by the lecturer but once underway lecturers usually withdraw (Brown, 2001; Cain et al., 2003; Rovai, 2004). The development of the social forum would then depend on the supportive contributions from interested learners (Brown, 2001; Cain et al., 2003; Rovai, 2004). Conversely, some learners are not at all interested in socialising in their paper and choose not to contribute to social forum (Brown, 2001; Liu et al., 2007). The implication is that the social forum should, as it was in the paper of interest, remain as an optional aspect of an online paper

### **Learner support programmes**

Universities adopt many different support programmes to meet online learners’ needs. These often require lecturer input in terms of recruiting candidates, training, organisation and resourcing. The benefits of a particular programme may be announced in a class email to recruit interested learners who would then be directed to an online link for further information (Hurley, Jacobs & Gilbert, 2006; Simpson, 2002). Some support programmes include only learners, while others involve groups of learners with a leader or perhaps a partnership between a tutor and a learner. The expert is recompensed in some programmes while in others volunteers are engaged for the duration of the paper. Discussion in this section outlines three support programmes. The first is mentoring, followed by peer learning and peer support and this section concludes with a description of the present study.

#### *Mentoring*

Mentoring is, perhaps, one of the most familiar learner support programmes. It is widely used in professional and commercial fields for professional development (Hawkridge, 2003; Stein & Glazer, 2003; Zachary, 2000). Zachary regarded mentoring as a “learning partnership” (p.

3) with an expert as the mentor and a protégé as the mentee. The objective of a mentoring partnership is for the mentor and mentee to work together to meet the mentee's needs (Zachary, 2000). Their needs may be learning related, social, a professional issue, or simply a straightforward request for advice (Zachary, 2000). A mentoring partnership is often based upon a formal contract where, although the mentor may take the lead, both partners share responsibility for the growth of their relationship (Zachary, 2000). A mentoring relationship demonstrates some characteristics of Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist learning theory. A mentor may well be another learner, or a tutor or lecturer. Scaffolding allows the mentee to achieve at a slightly more advanced level as a result of the support they receive.

Mentoring may be implemented in on-campus or online (e-mentoring) environments or in a blend of both settings (Hawkrige, 2003, Stein & Glazer, 2003). The advantage of e-mentoring is that the flexibility of online communications (such as email, video conferencing or websites) allows for mentors and mentees, regardless of their location, to build a mentoring relationship (Hawkrige, 2003; O'Neill, Weiler & Sha, 2005; Single & Muller, 2001). A further advantage from using e-mentoring is that often there is access to a more diverse group of mentors and mentees when technology is used to connect international partners (O'Neill et al., 2005).

In common with any relationship, learners in a mentoring partnership often connect with a person with whom they feel they have something in common (Edwards & Gordon, 2006; Single & Muller, 2001; Zachary, 2000). Zachary's (2000) mentoring programme described four phases; preparing, negotiating, enabling and bringing the relationship to closure. He noted that "relationship is the glue of the mentoring partnership" (p. 82) and so preparing and nurturing the relationship contribute to a positive mentoring experience. Therefore, careful mentor-mentee matching and/or an opportunity to find out about each other before entering a relationship is strongly recommended (Crossland, 1997; Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Single & Muller, 2001; Zachary, 2000).

As part of the preparation for entering an e-mentoring relationship, Single's and Muller's (2001) applicants were asked to agree to exchange weekly emails with their prospective e-mentoring partner. In return, the programme coordinator provided them with coaching tips, access to a mentoring website and general support (Single & Muller, 2001). They described three different methods for programme coordinators to use to match online mentors with

online mentees. In the first of Single's and Muller's methods, learners selected a likely match after referring to a mentor's profile after the programme coordinator posted profiles on the website. Similarly, O'Neill et al. (2005) found that a database including mentors' skills, experiences and interests was useful in the matching process. Single's and Muller's next method involved the programme coordinator matching potential candidates by using mentee preferences for a prospective mentor. Finally, they noted that when there are only a small number of people to be linked, then the programme coordinator uses both mentor and mentee preferences, skills, interests and experiences to facilitate the match. Single and Muller also found that a computer programme for matching a large number of people was a successful method although the matches were also reviewed by staff before any notifications were provided.

The process for building a successful mentoring relationship involves establishing a connection, getting to know each other, and maintaining contact throughout the experience (Zachary, 2000). During this negotiating stage, the mentee hopefully gains confidence working with their mentor and seeking assistance from them (Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Zachary, 2000). Over time however, it is expected that the mentee will become more independent and self-directed as their skill level increases (Oliver, 1999; Stein & Glazer, 2003; Zachary, 2000). The mentoring process reflects Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist learning theory when learners interact with their mentor and are actively involved in their own learning. The importance for ensuring that there is ongoing communication (such as phone or email) organised at the earliest stage contributes to the building of a successful mentoring relationship (Salmon, 2001; Single & Muller, 2001; Zachary, 2000). Once communication links are established the mentoring process may follow set stages within a programme or perhaps begins with a face-to-face briefing meeting (Zachary, 2000).

An initial meeting often prepares the groundwork for the mentoring process to begin although in e-mentoring, this is often not possible due to the location or possible different time zones of partners (Zachary, 2000). Single and Muller (2001) however, noted that online training or a briefing for mentors and mentees is often provided via the internet. A briefing meeting (online or on-campus) not only ensures that mentors and mentees begin with a focus on learning but it also provides them with an understanding of the strategies involved in the mentoring process (Crossland, 1997; Edwards & Gordon, 2006; O'Neill et al., 2005; Single & Muller, 2001). Alternatively, partners become familiar with mentoring while they are

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actually involved working through the stages in the mentoring process (Crossland, 1997; O'Neill et al., 2005).

A problem often develops in mentoring when a mentee does not receive prompt support and this may hinder their motivation and learning (Dzakiria, 2008; Hawkrige, 2003). O'Neill et al. (2005) reported that when mentors include “opportunities for just-in-time learning” (p. 114) they often address the concern or provide the necessary guidance for the mentee to solve their own problem. Just-in-time learning depends on the mentor’s ability to respond to the mentee’s requests, as and when required, and the success of this process often depends on their relationship (O'Neill et al., 2005). During this phase, a mentor’s scaffolding encourages the mentee to be actively involved in problem solving, decision making and learning (Zachary, 2000). In Zachary’s enabling phase the mentee’s accomplishments and the growth of the mentoring partnership continue to develop as learning goals are achieved. The mentor’s and mentee’s joint understanding of the mentoring process assists them to clarify the purpose and direction of their partnership (Salmon, 2001; Zachary, 2000).

When a mentoring relationship reaches closure, there is ideally an opportunity for reflection, evaluation and future goal setting (Zachary, 2000). Stein and Glazer (2003) noted that mentoring assists a mentee “to navigate through the academic maze” (p. 16). This process involves the mentor providing guidance about related academic issues such as becoming a scholar, career choices and not just focussing on content knowledge (Stein & Glazer, 2003). Mentoring programmes may meet a mentee’s learning needs, as well as contribute to their motivation and satisfaction with their educational experience (Dzakiria, 2008; Sinclair, 2003; Single & Muller, 2001; Stein & Glazer, 2003; Zachary, 2000). The success of mentoring programmes online and on-campus depends on the relationship that is built and the mentor’s and mentees’ commitment to problem solve together.

### *Peer learning*

In peer learning, whether it is online or on-campus, in a group or with just two learners, the benefits are usually reciprocal because those involved share the roles of teacher or learner (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999; Keppell et al., 2006). Peer learning often involves learners working together without the direct supervision of their lecturer (Boud et al., 1999; Keppell et al., 2006; McLuckie & Topping, 2004; Ng, 2008). It differs from mentoring because there is

not a requirement for one 'expert' in the relationship because learners adopt this role, as and when, it is appropriate.

Often peer learning includes an assessment task (as part of the final grade) where there is a consideration of each learner's role as well as an evaluation of their contribution to the assessment task (Keppell et al., 2006; McLuckie & Topping, 2004; Ng, 2008). Time for each peer learning group to interact and cooperate is often built into the paper and this interaction may be via the online paper or in a face-to-face meeting (Keppell et al., 2006). In common with a mentoring relationship, peer learning also reflects some characteristics of Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist learning theory. Peer learning particularly values the diverse backgrounds and experiences of learners because they provide different viewpoints about a particular topic. Peer learners may also benefit from the opportunity to give or receive scaffolding, to engage in discourse and to jointly construct new knowledge (Boud et al., 1999).

Peer learners are usually of equal status because they are both enrolled in the same paper and they are usually at the same stage with their learning (Boud et al., 1999; Keppell et al., 2006; Scott, Castañeda, Quick & Linney, 2009; Topping, 2005). Keppell et al. described peer learning and the receiving or giving of peer feedback as an "open and non-threatening" process (p. 458). They reported that participants in an art module appreciated the feedback from their peers and felt confident to challenge ideas that others had presented. This experience was similar to that described by Scott et al. who noted that when one participant established an optional video conference for other participants to share their work, or ask for advice, they found that this was a successful approach. Roles in the synchronous video conferences were shared and learners reported that they felt they were part of a learning community and that their social presence was enhanced (Scott et al., 2009). Scott et al. concluded that learning is effective when the guidance learners receive is "peer-driven and peer-supportive" (p. 129).

### *Peer support*

A peer support partnership is one where learners provide or receive informal support or guidance from another learner in their paper (Kear, 2004; O'Neill et al., 2005; Simpson, 2002). The development of a peer support partnership depends on the people involved, the building of their relationship and their unique needs (Simpson, 2002). Peer support does not

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require lecturer involvement or ongoing assistance from an expert and there is no training or briefing meeting required (Crossland, 1997; Edwards & Gordon, 2006; Single & Muller, 2001). Peer support may also be an alternative when the lecturer is delayed responding to a question because a partner may often provide the answer (McLuckie & Topping, 2004). Unlike peer learning, peer support does not require lecturers to provide an opportunity for learners in their papers to work together on an assessment task (Keppell et al., 2006; McLuckie & Topping, 2004; Ng, 2008).

At the beginning of, and during online papers, learners often seek assistance from other learners (Cain et al., 2003; Liu et al., 2007; Selby & Ryba, 1999). McLoughlin and Marshall (2000) noted that new learners to the online environment are often faced with tasks which require them to have already developed knowledge about how to learn online. These new online learners are likely to benefit from a partner's informal support as this would help them to adjust to the learning environment (Cain et al., 2003). An ideal peer support partnership is initiated and developed by learners themselves, and the giving and receiving of feedback to meet individual needs, contributes to the growth of the partnership (Topping, 2005).

In the peer support partnership, when a problem arises concerning an aspect of the course content or when clarification is required, one learner may provide the answer, further information or feedback (Kear, 2004; McLoughlin & Marshall, 2000; Phillips, 2003). For example, learners found that interaction and support from others in their paper contributed to a positive educational experience as well as the possible establishment of a future social network (Cain et al., 2003). Similarly, Kear found that optional peer support conferences assisted learners with their academic study because they provided valuable information and helped them to understand the content of their paper. Her participants stated that it was helpful receiving another learner's perspective rather than always relying on the lecturer's viewpoint. Cain et al. and Kear reported that learners found it motivational when there were others with similar problems as they were able to work together to find a solution. The opportunity to give and receive feedback helps them learn with and from each other (Kear, 2004; Keppell et al., 2006; Topping, 2005). A further benefit from peer support occurs when learners solve problems together they often clarify or reinforce their own learning at the same time (Kear, 2004; Keppell et al., 2006; Lapadat, 2002; Topping & Ehly, 2001).

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Peer support also reflects some characteristics of Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist learning theory when learners engage in discourse to clarify issues as they construct new knowledge. Scaffolding may occur within a peer support partnership when one partner has more specific knowledge or experience about a particular topic and supports the other learner. Peer support also has the potential to guide learners into the scholarly world and to provide them with informal support for a range of issues and topics. This study, describing the benefits of peer support for online learners, adds to the available literature about this topic by describing in detail participants' experiences and opinions.

### **The present study**

In my recent academic study for a postgraduate qualification, I experienced some of the issues I have since read about in the online learning literature. I found that online learning could be isolating, I needed to be self motivated and I was often unsure about the requirements of the paper and needed clarification. At an early stage however, I met another learner who was enrolled in the paper, and we decided to work together to provide each other with support and encouragement. We emailed each other regularly with reminders about the learning schedule, and responded to each other's online posts in C.M.C. to ensure that we each received at least one reply. We talked about the terms being used in the paper, clarified general concepts, gave feedback and provided general support for each other. This peer support was very helpful and motivating for both of us and this led to my decision to see if it would be similarly beneficial for others.

I considered that learners would be interested in volunteering to use this type of informal support because there was no training session required, rules to follow or extra time needed to take part. I recruited six participants who enrolled in the same paper the following year. They were encouraged to provide guidance, encouragement and feedback for each other for the first 13-week semester of the university year. Their peer support partner was generally known as their 'study buddy.'

The year-long paper was divided into two 13-week semesters. Enrolled learners included some completing the full year and others who had joined for the second semester only. For some learners in the course it was a pre-requisite for a Master of Arts degree while, for others it was an optional paper for their postgraduate qualification. One stated goal of this postgraduate paper was to build a collaborative learner-centred community that reflected

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social constructivist learning theory while fostering in depth coverage of the course content. According to the course coordinator this paper was designed to model expectations for interactions as well as encouraging learners to participate in and initiate discussions within C.M.C. It was also designed to nurture social presence by building a learning community. Learners were encouraged to make social connections through the use of learner profiles and the social forum. In the first week of the semester, learners were encouraged to upload a photo and post an introductory message. The course coordinator wrote in the course book that the social forum would help learners consider that they were communicating with an actual person. It appears that the course coordinator sought to encourage social connections, positive interactions, social presence and the building of a learning community.

The software package used was Moodle and in the first semester it was divided into one or two-week conferences centred on a topic with readings and an online asynchronous discussion associated with those readings. The lecturer posted initial comments and then learners and the lecturer responded to each other using a threaded discussion. Expectations regarding the course were conveyed in both the online learning guide and course book. In each week there was a learning guide with an introduction and sections about what to read, what to do and the discussion itself. In addition, general resources and an assignment-based forum for queries about assessments were included within this online paper. The course coordinator advised learners in the course book that the discussion forum was an important learning activity and they were encouraged to contribute often. Learners were expected to place at least one comment per week in semester one, with these contributions totalling a possible 10% of the final mark for the paper. This grade was dependent on the quality of the learner's contribution.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

This chapter begins with a discussion on the nature of qualitative research and includes a description of the role of the researcher. The methods section which includes information about sampling, the participant briefing and my data collection methods (demographic information, focus group interviews, individual interviews, a questionnaire, diary and contact charts) follows. The chapter concludes with a statement about data analysis (description and interpretation), ethical issues and confidentiality.

#### **Qualitative Inquiry**

I used qualitative inquiry for this study as this approach was well suited to my research question which required understanding of participants' experiences and detailed descriptive data. The question was 'How does peer support benefit online learners?' The process of qualitative inquiry required me to get close to my participants, to understand their views and to find out directly from them, their experiences of peer support. The framework for a qualitative inquiry includes three design strategies which are inextricably linked: naturalistic inquiry, emergent design and purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

#### *Naturalistic inquiry*

According to Patton (2002), naturalistic inquiry requires that the researcher refrain from manipulating the research environment. The goal is to let the research topic unfold naturally thus enabling the researcher to develop an authentic understanding of the actual day-to-day experiences of participants (Patton, 2002). He reported that "observations take place in real-world settings and people are interviewed with open-ended questions in places and under conditions that are comfortable for and familiar to them" (p. 39). Patton noted that while this is the aim, in fact, all research has some degree of researcher intervention. He places research along a continuum from open-field work to laboratory experiments with the position of naturalistic inquiry depending on the "degrees of researcher control and manipulation" (p.

42). Patton argues that, in a naturalistic inquiry, participants “direct the change, not the researcher” (p. 42). In line with this thinking, I explained to participants that I wanted to understand from their perspective, their experiences of, and opinions about, the use of peer support as a tool for helping online learners. As I used a relatively broad focus of inquiry I was able to respond to the information participants provided by following up on any ideas they introduced.

The use of open-ended questions during interviewing contributes to naturalistic inquiry because participants have an opportunity to influence the direction of the inquiry. There are no right or wrong answers to the researcher’s questions (Glesne, 2006; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Morgan, 1997; Patton, 2002). Rather there is a sharing of information with the aim of developing a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences (Glesne, 2006; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Patton, 2002). This approach provides participants with some control over the interview discussion, the research focus and the outcomes which contributes to naturalistic inquiry.

### *Emergent Design*

The design of a qualitative study is emergent, flexible and not finalised at the beginning of a study although some preparatory work is in place (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). Similarly, Janesick (2003) described qualitative inquiry as having “an elastic quality” (p. 73) meaning that adjustments occur at any stage of the research while still maintaining the research focus. In this study, although I had an initial design, interview questions and another data collection tool (a questionnaire) were added as the research developed. This enabled me to respond to issues raised by participants. This approach, where the focus of study is constantly expanded or refined, reflects a qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2009; Janesick, 2003; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Patton, 2002). In the words of Creswell “all phases of the process may change or shift after the researcher enters the field and begins to collect data” (p. 176).

The flexibility of my design was best reflected in my practice of being open to and listening carefully to all participants’ contributions and letting their experiences and opinions guide the direction of this study. For example, in line with participants’ suggestions I changed my original name for the partnership from peer collaboration to peer support. My objective in this study was to find out as much as possible from each participant’s perspective about their

experiences using peer support. The more information I gathered, the clearer the focus of this study became and the deeper was my understanding of participants' peer support experiences.

### *Case Studies*

Six participants were selected, from one university paper in a programme, for one semester to form the basis of three case studies. A case study, according to Stake (2003) "is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied" (p. 134). In case studies, each participant and their context are described and multiple data collection tools are used to present an in-depth understanding of their experiences and opinions (Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002; Stake, 2003). Using this process, a case study is presented with a holistic perspective that contextualises participants' experiences within their unique setting and where data is viewed as a whole rather than its parts (Janesick, 2003; Patton, 2002). Stake noted that "a case study is both a process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry" (p. 136). The collection, interpretation and presentation of a case study contribute to a qualitative inquiry (Stake, 2003; Patton, 2002). Stake noted that when a case is studied in depth over a period of time it helps the researcher to understand the phenomenon, which in this study was the peer support partnership.

Participants' data was documented in three case studies highlighting individual and partnership experiences of peer support. In the words of Patton (2002) "each case study in a report stands alone, allowing the reader to understand the case as a unique, holistic entity" (p. 450). In each case study, I followed the same procedure and included data about each participant's background, opinions and experiences before including information about their peer support partnership. I acknowledged participants' central role in this study by including their own words to demonstrate their points of view.

**Table 1**

### **Case studies, peer support partners, pseudonyms and methods of sampling**

<i>Case study 1:</i>	Cassie & Emma (Cassie recruited Emma)
<i>Case study 2:</i>	Beth & Georgie (Beth & Georgie were matched)
<i>Case study 3:</i>	Fiona & Daniel (Fiona & Daniel self-selected)

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### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher can be regarded as the human instrument in qualitative research (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Janesick, 2003; Patton, 2002; Pillow, 2003). Maykut and Morehouse described the researcher “as both the collector of relevant data [...] and the culler of meaning from that data” (p. 46). The researcher’s role in data collection and analysis is influenced by his or her background experiences and viewpoints as is their interpretation of what each participant’s data means for the study (Creswell, 2009; Janesick, 2003; Patton, 2002). Pillow noted that an openness and willingness to acknowledge the role and position of the researcher contributes to qualitative inquiry. Similarly, power differences, the quality of the data and ethical issues need to be addressed as this process contributes to the credibility of the researcher (Creswell, 2009; Glesne, 2006; Janesick, 2003; Patton, 2002).

I am a learner, a researcher and a lecturer in an undergraduate programme at the same university where participants in this study were enrolled. The fact that I was a lecturer lends itself to the possibility that an already unequal balance of power between participants and researcher is increased. Mitigating factors were that I did not teach any of the participants during this time and I was not involved in assessing or administrating their paper. I had lectured two of the six participants in the previous year but I was not scheduled to teach them during their postgraduate course. None-the-less, there was a lecturer-student relationship and these two participants may have been influenced by a power imbalance. They may have had concerns that I might talk to colleagues about my research and their experiences. To address this I advised them that I would keep all information confidential and I presented myself as a post-graduate student. Two other participants were my contemporaries. They were in the same age group as me, were professional colleagues and because of this they may have felt pressured to take part in this study. I addressed this by explaining that I would maintain their confidentiality and I would not discuss this study during our professional contact.

Throughout the study I maintained regular contact with participants using a group email, individual emails and phone calls. My messages were informal, friendly and included general questions about participants’ academic study or holiday breaks. I also reminded participants in my communication with them to keep in contact with their partner. Where appropriate I also provided encouragement and advice for individual participants and the group. For example, at the beginning of the first semester, two participants had not received their course book and I provided them with an email copy. In a further example, some participants wanted help using

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the university referencing style and I posted them each a book about this topic. I also emailed participants information about some library skills workshops that I had found useful. A direct result was that two participants attended a referencing workshop.

In qualitative inquiry the researcher is encouraged to develop rapport with participants because it is participants' views that are the focus of the study. Participants often do not so readily give their opinions if they feel that the researcher had not attempted to get to know them as individuals or valued their involvement in the study (Bernard et al., 2000; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Patton, 2002). A relaxed and friendly environment is conducive to the building of rapport and the sharing of information (Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002). At the beginning of this study I needed to establish a rapport with each participant and believed it would be beneficial for my relationship to meet face-to-face at a briefing meeting (see p. 29). Already knowing four participants proved beneficial in so far as we readily established rapport. These participants convinced me that they felt comfortable sharing their experiences. My experiences as a postgraduate learner in the same paper, gave me some understanding of the concerns, expectations and challenges participants faced. I also discussed my experiences using peer support with participants. At that stage I had three years experience using online learning and was familiar with Moodle software. This was helpful because I was able to support some participants and encourage them to support each other particularly when they initially had difficulty using this newly introduced software.

My aim was to develop a relationship of trust with participants with the purpose of helping me to understand and appreciate their perspectives and to make sure that they would feel comfortable sharing their ideas with me. Reciprocity was built by returning all interview transcripts to participants for their input. In my interpretations of the interview data I sought support from participants to ensure that I had captured their meaning by asking them for their feedback as to an accurate record. At the second focus group interview participants seemed genuinely pleased to meet each other again and were happy to chat informally about their academic study and personal lives. I measured the success of developing a positive rapport with participants by the good humour, chatting and banter that took place at the beginning and throughout the interviews. An advantage for individual participants from involvement in this study was the opportunity for them to get to know other learners in their paper and to share their experiences. Qualitative researchers often want participants to benefit from the research process and in this study I was keen to ensure that it was an enjoyable and a positive

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experience for them. According to Patton (2002) ongoing contact, developing a rapport and a sense of trust, can lead the researcher to experience a degree of connection with participants. I continued, after this study was completed, to email participants to share general information and to find out about the outcome of their academic study.

Although I was focussed on listening to participants and capturing their experiences, the questions I asked during interviews and my interpretation of the data, were filtered through the lens of my cultural experiences and they were also influenced by my social and educational background. In the words of Denzin (1994), “so-called objective interpretations are impossible” (p. 507). In my own attempt to be true to participants’ experiences I was open and receptive to all data that they provided and I was not judgemental. I explained that there were no right or wrong answers because it was participants’ experiences that I wanted to understand. My description of my background experience, my aim to develop a close rapport with participants, my empathy and careful preparation for interviews, alongside my provision for participant feedback are included here with the aim to contribute to my credibility as a researcher.

### **Provisions for trustworthiness**

The procedures designed to enhance this study’s trustworthiness included using four different methods of data collection, peer review with my supervisors, and the opportunity for participants to read their own transcripts to ensure that I had captured their meaning. I also documented all the steps in the research process in dated entries in my research diary. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) recommended using such an audit trail because it contributes to the credibility of a study. In line with this recommendation, I also maintained a folder of printed documentation with copies of all email material, confirmation of all contact with participants, copies of all interview questions and transcripts for all data.

### **Methods**

#### *Selection of participants*

After learners had self-selected themselves into the same compulsory postgraduate paper through the usual enrolment procedure I phoned six learners who lived locally. These six post-graduate learners volunteered to use peer support for one university semester. Five of

these learners were known to me and I already had their contact details. I was aware through my informal interactions with them that they had enrolled in the paper of interest. Two of these learners worked full-time in education and they had supported each other during their preceding three years of online study. Two other learners were recent graduates from the same university undergraduate programme; were in the same age group and were known to me in a learner-lecturer relationship. I explained to these two learners that our previous professional relationship did not place them under any obligation and they were free to withdraw at any stage during the study (see Appendix A). One other learner had also recently graduated in the same academic discipline as the two other graduates and was recommended to me by a colleague.

At the beginning of the study participants either self-selected a peer support partner or were matched with a partner by me. Partners who self-selected chose their own partners to work with during this study. When I matched three participants, I did this according to their similar academic programme and being in the same age group as I believed that having something in common with their prospective partner would be an advantage. For convenience I chose participants who were all based in the same location as me because interviewing was my primary data collection method. Meeting face-to-face during the briefing meeting was helpful not only for each pair as they built a partnership but also for me to establish an initial connection with them. Further information about the sample, demographic information and the briefing meeting are described later in this chapter (see p. 29)

After participants had agreed to join the study I thought that having a similar background experience in their academic study was useful for establishing their partnership as it immediately gave these participants something in common to talk about. All six learners volunteered to take part in this study and I arranged a briefing meeting with each pair to provide background information about my study (see Appendix A) and to obtain their written consent (see Appendix B). Four participants were unfamiliar with using peer support. At the briefing meeting I also discussed and provided information for participants about the peer support strategies/questions that I had used in my own partnership during the previous year (see Appendix C).

During the second week of the first semester, two participants from different pairs of learners withdrew from their postgraduate course and therefore my study. I asked the remaining

learners if there was someone else they would like to work with in the paper. One participant (Emma) was subsequently recruited using this approach. I then arranged a briefing meeting for Cassie and Emma (her potential partner) to discuss this study and to obtain Emma's consent. Cassie chose to withdraw from her partnership two weeks before the end of the study and she was not replaced. I recruited the final participant, Georgie, after she was recommended to me by a colleague. I phoned her to discuss this study. She was unable to attend a briefing meeting immediately following recruitment so information was emailed to her and then discussed by phone. Consent was obtained by mail. I held a meeting two weeks later with Beth and her new partner, Georgie.

### **Demographic Information**

The participants were five females and one male (see Table 2). Their ages ranged from range 20-60 years with an average age of 35. Five participants self-identified as European New Zealanders and one as Taiwanese. All names are pseudonyms.

**Table 2**

#### **Demographic information of participants**

<b>Names</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Age band</b>
Cassie	Female	Taiwanese	31-40 years
Emma	Female	European New Zealander	20-30 years
Beth	Female	European New Zealander	20-30 years
Georgie	Female	European New Zealander	20-30 years
Fiona	Female	European New Zealander	41-50 years
Daniel	Male	European New Zealander	51-60 years

### **Participant Briefing**

Two pairs of participants met with me in my office and this was when the briefing information was explained and discussed. For the final pair, Daniel met with me in my office while Fiona received written information beforehand and then discussed the study with me by phone. Fiona had been unable to attend the briefing meeting due to work commitments. At each briefing, participants were given a diary (a school exercise book) in which to record information regarding their contact with their partner. I explained that they would be asked to

hand in their diaries at the end of the study. I provided this information at the beginning of the study so that participants would know that they were writing their diaries for me to read.

### **Data collection**

The purpose of my data collection was to provide detailed rich descriptions of each case. Patton (2002) noted that “qualitative data tell a story” from participants’ perspectives (p. 47). Similarly, Janesick (2003) explained that the researcher must use an effective means to explain data and present participants’ experiences to the reader. My objective was to produce a report that identified meanings participants had constructed, to remain as close as possible to the original data, and to create a coherent account of their experiences. I also wanted to reflect participants’ experiences and opinions. All data, once it was transcribed, was emailed to participants for their feedback and input. When participants had different understandings about the way the data had been transcribed I was able to use their suggestions to amend the transcript.

The strategy of using multiple methods of data collection was identified by Patton (2002) as one way of using triangulation to “strengthen a study by combining methods” (p. 247). I used data triangulation with different collection methods (focus group and individual interviews, a questionnaire, diaries and/or contact charts) to allow me to compare, contrast and confirm the consistency of my findings from the diverse viewpoints of participants and to extend the richness of the data. Creswell (2009) noted that the researcher often re-examines data and discovers any “categories or themes that cut across all data sources” (p. 175). My aim was to build up a rich picture of participants’ peer support experiences, firstly as individuals, then as partners and finally as cases.

### *Research timeline*

Participants used peer support for 13 weeks (25<sup>th</sup> February – 23<sup>rd</sup> May) from the first to the last day of semester one in the academic year (see Table 3). Data collection commenced on the first day of the semester and continued until the final individual interview was held in mid August. As Table 3 shows, I used two focus group interviews, an individual interview with each participant, a questionnaire, diaries and contact charts to help me gain an in-depth understanding which helped me to understand participants’ peer support experiences.

**Table 3**  
**Research timeline**

<b>Dates</b>	<b>Research</b>
19-22 February	Briefing meetings with participants
25 February	<i>Semester one commences</i>
13 March	Emma (new learner) recruited by Cassie
27 March	Briefing meeting with Cassie & Emma
7 April	Georgie recruited by researcher
22 April	Briefing meeting with Beth & Georgie
30 April	Focus Group Interview 1 (Fiona, Daniel, Cassie, Emma, Beth) Contact chart introduced
14 May	Cassie withdrew from her partnership
16 May	Individual interview & questionnaire with Cassie No diary or contact charts provided
21 May	Individual interview & questionnaire with Emma Diary provided
23 May	<i>Semester one ends</i>
7 July	<i>Semester two commences</i>
16 July	Focus Group Interview 2 (Fiona, Daniel, Emma, Beth, Georgie)
30 July	Individual interview & questionnaire with Beth Diary & Contact charts provided
7 August	Individual Interview & questionnaire with Fiona Diary & Contact charts provided
8 August	Individual interview & questionnaire with Georgie Contact Charts provided
15 August	Individual interview & questionnaire with Daniel Diary & Contact charts provided

## **Interviewing**

Effective interviewing depends on the researcher's rapport with participants and his or her ability to encourage active participation in discussion (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Morgan, 1997). The researcher's skill in encouraging participants to freely provide their own ideas adds to the richness of data (Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002). I began the process of building rapport at the briefing meetings and continued to interact with participants each fortnight through email or phone contact (see p. 25). Maykut and Morehouse reported that a "nonjudgmental and trustworthy interviewer" (p. 105) is the key to an effective interview. Therefore, my preparation and subsequent role in the interview process were critical to this method of data collection. I used two different techniques to plan and prepare for interviewing with a pilot interview and a funnel based approach.

### *Pilot interview*

My purpose for using a pilot interview was to ensure that subsequent interviews were well structured and would encourage participation. I chose a former student who had used peer support in online learning and was of a similar age to two of the participants. Glesne (2006) and Maykut and Morehouse (1994) reported that critical feedback from a pilot interview assists a researcher with question design. As a result of the feedback I received at the pilot interview, I decided to include questions about selecting a peer support partner and I also made changes to my interview guide. During the pilot interview I took the opportunity to trial my digital recording techniques. I made the decision to use both digital and audio recordings for all interviews, in case one recording method failed.

### *Funnel based*

Morgan (1997) recommended that the funnel based approach was a useful way to begin an interview. He noted that informal discussion before the more focussed questions are asked allows the researcher to hear in an informal way from each participant. The benefit from using a funnel based approach is that participants often build up their confidence to contribute to an interview and also feel more at ease with others in the group (Morgan, 1997). I used questions that participants were likely to readily answer such as 'How would you describe peer support?' Following this type of question I then used more specific questions such as 'What

do you talk about with your partner?’ or ‘Explain your expectations of your peer support partnership’.

### *Focus Group Interviews*

Focus group interviews are an opportunity for participants to hear about each others’ experiences when they discuss in a group setting a topic of common interest (Glesne, 2006; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Morgan, 1997). Maykut and Morehouse described a focus group interview as “*a group conversation with a purpose*” (p. 104) (italics in original). Focus group interviews reflect Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivist learning theory because discourse and the opportunity for knowledge to be socially negotiated are central to this data collection tool. Maykut and Morehouse described focus group interviews as “open and emergent” (p. 103) as often participants’ remarks and the subsequent discussion change the direction of an interview. The data gained in focus group interviews often provides the researcher with an opportunity to compare and contrast individual participant’s views and experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Morgan, 1997).

The researcher’s topic is usually the focus of the interview while “data themselves come from the group interaction” (Morgan, 1997, p. 6). An advantage of a focus group is that participants will often be encouraged by what someone else contributes to the interview and they will subsequently provide further information about the topic (Morgan, 1997). During focus group interviews participants often retrieve a memory about a particular experience when something, someone else mentions, triggers their recall (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002; Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Other participants often supply encouragement, further questions and/or feedback to each other during focus group interviews (Patton, 2002).

Some potential hazards of focus group interviews occur when one person dominates the discussion, other participants do not get an opportunity to contribute or one person is reluctant to express their ideas (Creswell, 1998; Morgan, 1997). I addressed this situation by asking a participant directly for their ideas about the topic as well as finding out what others also thought. Participants declined my offer when they did not want to contribute to a particular question. I made participants feel comfortable about declining to contribute by accepting their decision. I would then move on to the next question or topic. In a focus group interview sometimes the group inadvertently influences an individual to believe that because their view is different from the majority, they are not confident about sharing their ideas (Berg, 2001;

Glesne, 2006). To avoid this happening, I gave immediate feedback and made positive comments to encourage the participant to continue to provide their ideas. Another drawback of focus group interviews is the possibility that a participant may have felt inhibited or pressured by the presence of their peer support partner or other participants. I encouraged all participants to tell me their thoughts and opinions (positive or negative) about peer support. Sometimes during interviews one participant may say something derogatory about another person and this can cause embarrassment and perhaps a breakdown in their relationship. Fortunately in the present study, this did not happen during either focus group interview. In an ideal interviewing environment, a focus group interview encourages participants to contribute unreservedly about experiences and opinions concerning the topic (Berg, 2001; Glesne, 2006; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Patton, 2002). As discussed earlier, this is more likely to happen when rapport has been established, power differentials addressed and everyone feels comfortable about their involvement in the interview.

### *Questioning*

Often participants shape their answers to match the researcher's interest rather than provide their own ideas about the topic (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). To avoid this, I used open-ended questions to give participants the idea that I was not seeking a specific response but rather I wanted to hear about their ideas from their own perspective. Open-ended questions are designed by a researcher to encourage full participation and to gain further information (Glesne, 2006; Morgan, 1997; Patton, 2002). My open-ended questions encouraged more expansive answers when I used starters such as 'explain why' or 'tell me about'. My aim was to avoid questions that participants would answer with one or two words.

### *Question probes*

According to Glesne (2006), question "probes are a request for more: more explanation, clarification, description, and evaluation" (p. 96). They are often pre-planned by the researcher to encourage participants to provide further information (Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002). Alternatively probes may be designed by the researcher to use during the actual interview if the need arises. Probes are also helpful when another angle to the same question is required (Creswell, 2009; Glesne, 2006; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Patton, 2002). I designed probes (and open-ended questions) to elicit in-depth responses and to gather further

information. Probes were included in my interview schedules for me to use if I needed to rephrase or pursue a particular topic in more depth (see Appendix D or E).

#### *Organisation of focus group interviews*

There were two focus group interviews in this study, each lasted approximately one hour and they were held in a small meeting room at the university. Although ideally, one should use a familiar space for participants, this was not possible because participants were online learners and they were unfamiliar with the university campus. The meeting room was made as comfortable as possible with armchairs set around a table to encourage discussion. There were five participants at each focus group interview because at the first, Georgie was out of town and at the second interview Cassie had already left the study (see Table 3).

Before I started each focus group interview I welcomed and introduced participants and provided them with refreshments. Informal conversations about general social topics, such as the weather, took place before each interview and then everyone sat in a circle around the table. Reference was made to the protocol chart which described the interview procedure and this was then placed on the wall (see Appendix F). Ethics about what other people said during the focus group interview was given high priority. Participants were asked not to discuss information from the interview with other people and to maintain confidentiality. Permission was asked regarding recording each session using tape and digital recorders.

Each interview followed the same procedure with a discussion starter such as ‘tell the group about your current academic programme’ or ‘describe a holiday experience.’ Participants readily responded to these discussion starters and they asked further questions to clarify information that others had provided. The procedure after the discussion starter was to use a brainstorm, followed by questions and discussion related to participants’ peer support experiences. Each focus group interview concluded with an opportunity for participants to add any further information that I may have forgotten to ask them. At the conclusion of each focus group interview I thanked participants and explained that I would email the transcript for them to provide feedback and to ensure that it was an accurate account of the interview.

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*Individual Interviews*

Morgan (1997) reported that the close relationship between participant and researcher in a supportive setting and the ease with which the direction of discussion may be changed is an advantage of using individual interviews. Patton (2002) identified “openness, sensitivity, respect, awareness and responsiveness” (p. 40) as researcher attributes and it was easier for me to display these qualities in a one-to-one setting. As the individual interviews were scheduled to follow the second focus group interview this enabled me, as Glesne (2006) found, to explore, clarify and follow up any issues that were first raised in a focus group interview. Using an emergent design I adjusted my research focus during the individual interviews to respond to information gathered from the two focus group interviews. I reworked questions and sought clarification or further explanation about a participant’s ideas or opinions that I was unable to fully understand during the focus group interview.

Each individual interview was tailored specifically for the interviewee (see Appendix G) although some questions were similar to those I had asked other participants. It was possible that a participant may have been reluctant to voice negative views in my presence. Therefore, I addressed issues of researcher bias by reminding participants that I did not need them to only express positive opinions about peer support. The individual interview provided participants with an opportunity to express their views without the presence of their partner or the other members of the focus group.

*Organisation of individual interviews*

In the weeks following the final focus group interview, individual interviews of 40-50 minutes were held with four participants. I had already held individual interviews with Cassie and Emma after their partnership finished two weeks before the end of the study (see Table 3). This meant that Emma, who remained in the study, had her individual interview before she attended the final focus group interview. At participants’ request four interviews were held in my office and two in participants’ work place offices. Selected items from the protocol chart were referred to such as confidentiality and reminding participants that their contributions were the focus of this study.

There was opportunity for me to develop rapport with each participant during the informal conversation before the beginning of each individual interview. This conversation was

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followed by a brainstorm about peer support and then I used open-ended questions to focus on participants' experiences and opinions. Participants were encouraged to provide more detail in their answers when I used question probes (see Appendix G). As this was my final face-to-face contact with each participant, I thanked them for their interest and involvement in the study and gave a book voucher as a token of my appreciation.

### **Questionnaire**

Each participant completed a questionnaire (see Appendix H) at the end of their individual interview. I decided midway through this study that a questionnaire would give me further information about participants' experiences and I introduced it as another data collection tool. Picciano's (2002) questionnaire about social presence and satisfaction with online learning was adapted for use in this study. In my adapted questionnaire I included five statements focussing on online learning and social presence with the remaining five directly related to peer support. The statements required participants to select from pre-determined categories on a seven point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). The questionnaire data was transcribed and I then pasted the information from each partnership on the same document. I read the information several times to give me a deeper, richer understanding of participants' perspectives and their experiences.

### **Diaries**

Diaries are often used to collect data from a participant's perspective about the research topic and other related issues (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005). My rationale for selecting diaries is in line with Thompson and Ku (2006) who reported that in research gaining "another layer of rich information" (p. 374) from participants is helpful. The use of diaries in this study meant that participants were given the opportunity to write about any issues that they may not have wanted to discuss directly with me, their peer support partner or the focus group. They could also record their experiences as they happened and provide me with a personal dimension. Participants were invited to record their contact with their partner, the topic of conversations and any other experiences or opinions that otherwise may not have emerged during interviews.

Zimmerman and Wieder (1977) noted that diaries provide the researcher with a "view from within" (p. 484) and in this study the diary information enhanced other data collected. Diaries

were intended to provide an alternative and a less public outlet for participants who may have been uncomfortable contributing their ideas in the group setting. None of the participants however, recorded information in their written documentation that had not been addressed during interviews. Participants informally named their diaries the ‘All Black book’ reflecting the cover illustration of the national sports team. Diaries were given to me at the end of the individual interview. Each diary was transcribed and I read the data several times in order to better understand each participant’s personal point of view.

### **Contact charts**

On the advice of one of my supervisors, partway through this study, I introduced an online weekly contact chart. Contact charts were intended to provide an alternative written document for participants to record their experiences (see Appendix I). The contact charts were designed to encourage participants to provide more specific information regarding the content of their discussion and the usefulness of any advice they received from their partner. The reasoning behind this tool was that because this study was focussed on online learning, it was therefore appropriate that an online version of a written document was made available for participants.

Participants however, asked me for printed copies of the contact charts because they did not want to use them online. I posted participants enough copies to last until the end of the study and included a glue stick and a pen for them to use. Those participants who used both written documents glued their contact charts into their diary. Each record provided valuable data and the decision about which (or both) document to use, was made individually. Some participants elected to use the diary or contact charts, while others used both and one participant used neither (see Table 3). Participants who used the contact charts gave them to me at the end of their individual interview. After transcription, I read the contact charts to gain further insight into individual participant’s experiences, their views about their partnership and peer support.

### **Data Analysis**

The goal of qualitative research according to Mutch (2005) is to reveal participants’ understandings rather than to make generalisations. As this study was a multiple case study I examined individual and partnership experiences to see how they made sense of the process. In order to achieve this goal, I read each transcript several times and listened to the audio tapes so that I would become more familiar with participants’ perspectives before I began any

description or interpretation of data. My aim by following this process was to maintain a strong link to data and participants' experiences which Creswell (1998), Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Woolcott (1994) reported is characteristic of a qualitative inquiry.

All data I collected was transcribed by a reputable service and the transcripts were emailed to me. I read all interview transcripts and reread them while I listened to the audio recordings. I addressed omissions before I emailed participants their own individual interview or focus group interview transcripts for their input. All transcripts were available for participants to read and make comment on to ensure that I had accurately included their words and experiences. This process provided me with an opportunity to get very familiar with the data and for participants to review their own transcripts and advise me of any concerns. Three participants requested an amendment to the first focus group interview transcript and I made these changes. Two were concerned about their grammar usage and asked me to express their ideas more clearly in the transcript. The third completed an unfinished sentence which made the meaning of the data much clearer for the reader. Their input did not impact upon the focus group interview data as a whole.

### *Description*

Two stages were used for data analysis. The first stage was a description of the results followed by their interpretation. In the second stage I wanted to develop a theory about participants' experiences and why their relationships worked as they did. The intention in a qualitative inquiry is for the description to be written with as little interpretation as possible and this process often poses a challenge for the researcher (Creswell, 1998; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Bogdan and Biklen (1998) and Creswell (2009) recommended that sorting data from the different tools is helpful. In this study, I combined data for each case from the two focus group interviews, their individual interviews, questionnaires and their diaries and/or contact charts into one document. Creswell (2009) noted that when the researcher reads through the whole data she or he gains an overview of the main ideas. I read and reread data for each case in this way and found, as Creswell (2009) reported, that this approach provided me with an opportunity to reflect on the meaning.

Mutch (2005) reported that themes often develop from the actual data. In this study, when themes emerged during my reading of transcripts I recorded them in the margins of the document. I gave the themes and sub themes straightforward names which were closely

linked to participants' voice, the topic and data (see Table 4). Janesick (2003) and Patton (2002) recommended that patterns or themes should not be identified before the research is started but should emerge from data itself during or after data collection. This process provides the researcher with the flexibility to widen or refine the research topic while data is being gathered and contributes to a qualitative inquiry (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Patton, 2002).

**Table 4**

**Themes in data**

Characteristics of peer support
Establishing a new relationship
Communicating with a partner
Types of support provided
Online experiences of peer support
Benefits/Disadvantages of peer support

Both Creswell (1998) and Woolcott (1994) recommended that researchers use a diagram to visually present the themes from data. I displayed the themes for this study on a drawing of a tree and this strategy provided me with a visual overview of all the data. Colour coding the transcripts to indicate how each participant's data related to the themes and sub themes was also a helpful approach. My next step was to paste the data into a new document for each case with theme headings. Codes such as 'F/1' for focus group one data and 'D' for diary data indicated the different sources within each document. In this way, I was able to see the connection between themes and sub themes for each case (e.g. communicating with a partner (theme) – types of communication used (sub-theme)). I discovered similarities and differences between the perspectives and experiences of each participant in the partnership before I began writing the case studies.

Each case study began with a description of participants' context. This was followed by a explanation of their partnership and online experiences. In two of the case studies there was detailed data for each section while in the other one there was a limited amount of data which reflected participants' experiences. Reading the three case studies several times helped me to

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review data to ensure that I had clearly described participants' experiences. I avoided interpretation at the description stage.

### *Interpretation*

Creswell (2009) reported that a researcher interprets data with the purpose to further understand the meaning of the information presented by participants. He suggested that themes be "analyzed for each individual case and across different cases" (p. 189). In this study, data from the three case studies was interpreted in my discussion chapter and links to the literature were highlighted. I explored the findings and used the data to answer the research question 'How does peer support benefit online learners?' I also answered the two sub questions 'What issues do peer support partners face?' and 'In what ways does peer support meet partners' needs? A summary of the main ideas to highlight key information was included at the end of the discussion chapter.

### **Ethical Issues**

At the beginning of this study I obtained ethical consent from the university where I was enrolled for my Master of Arts degree. Informed consent (see Appendix B) was also obtained from all participants prior to the beginning of their involvement in this study. Special ethical issues addressed in my application included advising participants that, with their consent, some email conversations would be used but only the information relating to this study would be included in the report.

Another ethical issue involved learners working together on the same assignment which can give rise to issues concerning plagiarism. To address this we discussed the need for each learner to complete their own assessment work. Another ethical issue concerned peer support partnerships that may have experienced problems. It was agreed that if at any stage, one or other partner wished to dissolve the partnership, they were free to do this. It was also possible that when working with pairs one learner may provide information about the other which is derogatory. I advised participants that although this information would be recorded on the audio and digital tape it would not be used in my results.

At the first focus group interview when participants had concerns about the administration of their online paper their issues were resolved after one participant provided the necessary

advice for the others. This information was not used in my results because it did not relate directly to a peer support partnership.

### **Confidentiality**

To protect their identity five participants were provided with a pseudonym while the other participant chose her own fictitious name. As this study involved three partnerships it was necessary to address the confidentiality of the information that one partner may have shared about the other. Confidentiality was a requirement at each interview. At the beginning of each interview participants were advised that personal information about them or their peer support partner would not be included in the final report. Participants were advised that all transcripts, consent forms and data would be destroyed after five years (see Appendix B).

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

This chapter describes participants' experiences of peer support. Three case studies were used to present this data and each one was enriched by including participants' own words. The interactions between participants in each case and their peer support partnerships provided the context for this study. The sections used in each case study were based on themes highlighted in data. My attempt to organise information into sections meant that some data would have been better placed in different sections of the case study. For example, I included general references to learning in the 'online learning experiences' section and data about learning with a peer support partner was placed in the 'peer support partnership' section.

The three case studies are presented using themes in order to better address issues raised by participants and they are not in chronological order of data collection. In each case information about partners is provided and I then describe how their peer support partnership developed. Following that, I focus on partnership experiences by including information about why contact was initiated and the types of support partners provided or received. Each case study concludes with a section about participants' online learning experiences with an emphasis on how the peer support relationship met each partner's needs. The first case study concentrates on Cassie's and Emma's experiences because they were first to finish their involvement in this study. Beth and Georgie were next and the final case study describes Fiona's and Daniel's experiences.

#### **Case Study 1 - Cassie & Emma**

Cassie was in the 31- 40 year age group and was the only participant not self-identified as European New Zealander. She was Taiwanese. Cassie had health issues midway through the first semester which meant that she did not participate in the paper for approximately three weeks. English was Cassie's second language and she had difficulty communicating her ideas, both orally and in written texts. Cassie was beginning her postgraduate study after

having completed her undergraduate tourism degree in the previous year. She lived in a residential college and studied in the campus library because her residence did not have broadband access. At the beginning of the academic year, Cassie explained that she had wasted much of her time looking for information about her paper. She had not received her course book and other material early enough for her to get organised and to find out the requirements before the first week of semester. Cassie did not think that her problem logging on to the paper was due to her English difficulties.

Her partner, Emma, was in the 20-30 year age group. She described herself as a confident online learner. She had previous online experience in other university papers. At her individual interview, Emma described online learning as “very individualistic, you sit in your little room and you do it and then you get on with life.” After having completed her undergraduate degree in marketing, Emma continued with full-time study (four papers) for her postgraduate qualification. She intended to achieve her master’s degree the following year. Emma lived locally but often visited her parents who were based in another city. She completed her academic study at home and also continued her online work when she was on holiday.

#### *The peer support partnership*

As stated, Cassie had initially been matched with another learner who withdrew from university (and this study) at the beginning of the academic year, after she had gained full-time employment. When I asked Cassie if she knew anyone else who might like to join as her partner, she said that there was someone who could be interested. Her email to Emma (her prospective partner) described a recent supportive friendship:

I have been thinking that you have been very good to me and like a study buddy to me. If you are interested in the project, then I will give your email address to {...} [the researcher] then she can contact you. If not, that is okay, we will leave it there. Nevertheless, I have really appreciated your contribution towards the papers in discussion board, and feeling warm for your care and reminders [sic].

Cassie and Emma were recent acquaintances who had met in person at a video conference for another paper. They found that they had all four papers in common, were studying full-time, lived locally and they volunteered to use peer support. Cassie and Emma saw their peer support partnership as a friendship. Emma explained that their partnership started quite

naturally and she did not have any expectations about how it would develop. At the first focus group interview, Cassie explained that peer support was a way to encourage each other while Emma, good humouredly, described this same process as a “poke with the stick.” These study buddies did not meet face-to-face very often but they did use text, phone and/or email to keep in contact. Discussion was a focus of their peer support partnership and Cassie explained that “bouncing ideas about what we have been studying” was useful. She valued learning about her study buddy’s perspective when they discussed the course content. Cassie explained their process in this way “we both had something different to each other. Some similarities but also there were some uniqueness.” Emma however, reported that there was only one discussion when Cassie helped to clarify her ideas.

Early in their partnership, Emma explained that peer support helped her avoid feeling isolated and provided direction for her learning. She described the benefit of having a study buddy in this way: “I think that just knowing {...} that you are not alone, you are not floating out in {...} some sort of random black hole with blinkers on.” Emma had found that many of her friends had left university after completing their undergraduate degrees and she needed to make new social connections. She actively looked for social contact at the beginning of the year and this is how she described her approach: “you cast your net wide and put out all the feelers and then it’s just whoever you get hits back from.” Cassie remarked that she appreciated making a new friend (Emma) and she found that her emotional support was helpful. She said that Emma cared about her and would often send emails to check up as to how she was coping. Like Emma, Cassie acknowledged isolation as a potentially negative aspect of her online learning:

Study by yourself it’s sometimes hard and sometimes study can be a lonely business and with your buddy every now and then whether you like it or not your buddy is there. Hey are you okay? I am still here. I am still alive. So it is nice. Thank you, Emma.

One method Emma used to try to make social connections with the class was to post the first message on the social forum. She said:

No one else was doing it. It was the first week I just like being friendly so I wanted to have a little bit of contact because I was thinking {...} there’s me and a computer and there’s no one else and its sort of like reach out and touch someone.

Unfortunately for Emma, even though she tried to entice others to contribute to the social forum when she said “I will put the jug on,” other learners did not participate. In contrast to Emma, Cassie was not at all interested in joining the social forum. She said: “I am not a person to check online with people. I find it maybe because of age. This is not my cup of tea.”

In her individual interview, Cassie explained that often Emma would remind her to make her computer mediated communication (C.M.C.) contribution and then she would send feedback and encouragement via email. At the first focus group interview, Emma reported that responding to each other in C.M.C. was not essential for building their partnership. She was concerned that relying on each other too heavily in this way was not helpful and that Cassie would benefit more from interaction with others in the learning community. Emma reasoned that when two people constantly reply to each other in C.M.C. it can “close off” the conversation to others in the class.

The records in Emma’s diary show that most of the contact for course related information was initiated by Cassie. In contrast, Emma’s emails to Cassie provided emotional support with messages such as “how is it going? are you okay?” On one occasion Cassie provided support for Emma when she needed to locate the name of a resource to use in her assignment. At the beginning of the semester, Emma gave Cassie practical support when she answered her questions about the paper and helped her to use Moodle. Cassie explained that it was also beneficial at this time to have someone specific (her study buddy) to ask questions. Later in the semester, Cassie also requested help with essay writing, academic article citations, interpreting assignment questions and editing assistance.

When asked about establishing a new peer support partnership at their individual interviews, Cassie and Emma recommended that locating your own study buddy, rather than being matched, was best. Cassie explained: “I don’t know how you become buddies. But I realised maybe it is good when we both are friends and we come together better than the match.” Emma described the process of matching in this way “it’s like pairing at school when you go 1, 2; 1, 2; 1, 2; you know and count them [the children] off. It’s completely random and you don’t know if you’re going to have a good one [partner].”

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They believed that friendship needed to be the starting point for a new partnership. Emma noted that a partnership should not be manipulated but allowed to develop naturally and that at least one face-to-face meeting was essential. She said that partners needed to have something in common and described this as a “meeting of the minds.” While Cassie noted that a partner you can talk to and feel comfortable with was preferable. Emma also recommended that regular communication and prompt responses were effective strategies to adopt in a new partnership.

When Cassie ended her involvement before the end of this study, she said it was because she preferred to work alone and was reluctant to talk with her study buddy about the course content. She believed that she did not have enough knowledge to contribute to the discussion and she did not want to have to worry about her study buddy. She added that she thought it was unfair to make Emma worry. When Cassie took three weeks leave from the paper, midway through the semester, she did not expect that Emma would be concerned about what had happened. She explained that she did not want the responsibility to help someone else. Cassie contradicted this viewpoint in her individual interview when she noted that peer support encouraged her to develop her relationships with other people.

At her individual interview, Emma expressed disappointment that their peer support partnership was not reciprocal, or as successful, as she had expected. She was concerned that Cassie relied heavily on her and did not contribute to their partnership or provide her with support. She was frustrated as she believed that she was doing two people’s work in the paper and was unable to concentrate on her own assignments. Emma described in her diary how she took time to help Cassie understand her assignment topics. Cassie however, expressed the belief that a peer support partnership required her to change her academic study style. In her email, when she explained her decision to withdraw from this study, Cassie said that it was a chance for her to return to her own style of learning and to have more time for her leisure interests. At Emma’s individual interview, she offered two reasons for their partnership difficulties. Firstly, she believed that they had not been friends for long enough before they became study buddies. Her other reason was, that as English was Cassie’s second language, there were some communication and interpretation difficulties.

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*The online learning experience*

This was Cassie's first experience of online learning and she was enrolled in three other online papers for her full-time course. Cassie expressed the belief that her initial experiences, when she had not received the course information before the beginning of semester, meant that she felt insecure using online learning. She also said that she missed face-to-face contact with other learners in her class. Cassie believed that the timetable in on-campus classes helps learners to be organised while online learners need to structure their time and tasks for themselves. She identified organisation, preparation for class and independence as key attributes for an online learner. When Cassie was unsure about what was happening in her paper or she did not understand the tasks she needed to complete she found that her peer support partner was helpful and provided guidance. Emma was more experienced using online learning and she also provided Cassie with straightforward advice about using Moodle and contributing to C.M.C. Cassie explained that she appreciated this advice as it helped her to gradually adjust to the online learning environment.

In Cassie's questionnaire, she reported that at the beginning of the year she lacked confidence using online learning and especially participating in C.M.C. When she addressed this issue again at the end of the study she noted that she had gained in confidence. She accessed her paper, after her initial hesitancy, 2-3 times a week and responded to other learners 1-2 times a week. By way of contrast, Emma reported that she was very confident using Moodle software right from the start and she went online twice a day and responded once a week throughout the semester to another learner in C.M.C..

At her individual interview, Emma suggested that learners who frequently contribute to C.M.C. were less likely to feel isolated and more likely to feel part of their learning community. In her words "if you're not regularly posting and you're not getting regular feedback then you feel quite lonely and you're just not involved in it." Similarly, Cassie explained that she began to feel part of the learning community when she contributed to C.M.C. and received feedback from other learners. She said at her individual interview that "the main thing is the thoughts, the ideas, the knowledge itself attract me more and so {...} the more I [get] into the study the more I feel I'm part of it." While Emma said:

I feel part of the class because I do check it [C.M.C.] every day and so I'm having interaction and I do the postings and that's kind of important. Even if it's just 'Hey, how are you? This is what I thought' {...} I do feel more a part of it [the class] if you do the posting. But probably you don't feel as much part of it as being with people.

Emma believed that if other learners responded more often in C.M.C. then she would perhaps have felt more positive about the paper and her experience. Face-to-face contact was important to Emma. In spite of her confidence using online learning and her active involvement in discussion forum, she still believed that the 'distance' aspect of online learning was insurmountable. She said "I don't think anything can make it [the paper] better because of the distance thing. Maybe if more people in the class generally contributed."

According to Emma, often online learners are self-centred as they only consider their own needs, do not help each other or contribute to building the learning community. In her experience, few people helped each other as happens in an ideal learning community. It is apparent that Emma interacted with other learners and helped them in much the same way that she supported Cassie. She explained:

[They] get in with the blinkers and just think of themselves. I think that's the nature of academic study sometimes and that's kind of sad because one thing that it [the course book] says for Moodle is they want an online learning community but I was going Well? How can that actually ever happen if you've got one person who is doing all the helping and everyone else are just looking out for themselves? That's not what a community is about.

The provision of a grade for online participation in C.M.C. influenced Cassie's and Emma's approach as they did not see that there was a need to contribute more often than was required for the grade. Emma did not believe that there was quality discussion, because of the provision of a grade, as some learners (like her) only contributed to gain their mark. She was of the opinion that her learning experience was dependent on learner collaboration and she appreciated prompt responses to her C.M.C. contributions.

Emma and Cassie had differing views regarding their online learning experiences. Emma enjoyed the online course, felt part of the class and agreed that their course allowed for social interaction. Cassie selected the 'no opinion' response for her enjoyment of the paper. She did

not feel part of the class and did not think that the course allowed for social interaction. Neither Emma nor Cassie believed that online learning could provide the personal experience learners gain from an on-campus classroom. They were both reluctant to contact the lecturer for advice. In this situation, Emma's solution would be to ask the learning community for help by posting her question on Moodle.

Emma appreciated that her computer provided her with a barrier from the lecturers in her paper. In her words "I sort of feel more protected I suppose. You can sit behind your computer and they [the lecturers] don't know your face." At the same time, Emma explained that online learning also provided her with an opportunity to interact directly with her lecturers within C.M.C. She added "you can maybe have more of a discussion with them on an academic level rather than feel that you're the inferior and they're the superior. You know, there's that power imbalance that evens out a bit."

### **Case study 2 - Beth & Georgie**

Beth and Georgie were in the 20-30 year age group and this was a compulsory paper for their postgraduate diplomas. They were continuing with academic study after each completing an undergraduate degree in the previous year. Beth's degree was in tourism while Georgie's was in business studies. This year both were enrolled in a full-time course with four papers but they had only one paper in common. Both participants lived in the same street, in close proximity to the university, and they studied at home. As both sets of parents lived in other cities, they often visited them. Beth had a part-time job while Georgie studied full-time.

As stated earlier, they were matched by me after Beth's first matched partner left university (and this study) at the beginning of the first semester. Georgie expressed interest when I invited her to participate in a peer support partnership. She emailed me this reply "looking forward to this whole study buddy thing as it might just save me from a big fat FAIL as I will know I have to do some work so thank you very much for the opportunity." Beth's initial contact with Georgie was by email:

I'm Beth (aka your new study buddy). The researcher just emailed your contact details, well email address anyway so I thought I'd throw you a line and introduce

myself/say hi. How are you finding the paper? What other papers are you taking? Loving it? Hating it? I'm doing four post grad papers. At the moment I'm finding it very difficult and it's so much easier to not do it since there's no lecturer hounding you to get things done. Anywho [sic] have a good day look forward to hearing from you.

### *The peer support partnership*

After working with her study buddy for several weeks, Beth confirmed her initial belief, that being involved in peer support would be helpful. She described a peer support partnership as an opportunity for learners to help each other out. Beth and Georgie found that talking together about the content of their paper was beneficial. They were able to clarify their ideas and learn together. Georgie also thought that when her partner explained her views about a topic, she would reinforce her own ideas at the same time. In the first focus group interview, Beth reported that she was reassured having someone to discuss her work with, to receive feedback and the confirmation that she was on the right track with her learning. She believed that her partner's emotional support was helpful. In her words:

I like having reassurance in what I am doing. I like to know I am not the only one that is having trouble and that I am kind of doing the right thing. It makes me feel a lot better about the stuff I am producing and how it is all going. I find it good because if I was doing this by myself I would be doing the completely wrong thing.

Georgie also found that receiving emotional support was motivational and she explained that being involved in peer support helped her to focus on her learning and the assignments she needed to complete. Georgie reported that in large on-campus classes she did not get to know many people and would generally only attend those classes where she had friends. In reference to her recent study buddy experience, Georgie believed that a partner may have made a difference to her attendance in, and enjoyment of, her on-campus classes.

During their email discussions both participants aired their dissatisfaction with their learning experience and the organisation of their paper. Georgie explained that she enjoys complaining and once she verbalises her thoughts, she is usually then able to complete her work. They both acknowledged that they had a similar outlook and attitude to learning and life in general. Beth explained "finding someone more on my wave length - Georgie. I think it is good." Similarly, Georgie said "I think it's good but the thing is Beth and me, you know, we talk and stuff."

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When asked about the attributes of a study buddy, Georgie noted that having a partner with similar academic interests, such as the same degree, would be helpful. Beth however, reported that there would be an advantage from having someone more organised in their peer support partnership. She explained that because she and Georgie were similar, in that they would both wait for the other person to make contact, then a more proactive partner would be preferable. Georgie confirmed that often their communication with each other was sporadic.

Beth was the only one in this partnership who regularly contributed to C.M.C. She was unable to respond online to her partner because Georgie only contributed once to C.M.C. Beth explained that when she had read Georgie's contribution she enjoyed it because she felt that she knew her. The value of face-to-face contact was confirmed in Beth's later comment after she recognised the C.M.C. contributions from other study buddies. In her words: "I do look for their ones [contributions] and because now I can put a face to their names and I do tend to post back more on their ones."

In this partnership, Beth noted that their contact was mainly for academic reasons and for a little social connection. With Georgie living away for some of the semester, they often chatted about life in general and this provided them with emotional support. Beth and Georgie only used email to contact each other. Their email communication happened particularly around the time assignments were due and they would send several emails backwards and forwards to each other all day (and sometimes all night). Georgie said that for the most part, she appreciated support from her study buddy at assignment preparation time. She found that it was helpful to know that someone else was having similar problems and they were able to encourage each other and complete their assignments.

The different types of support they provided each other were recorded in Georgie's contact charts. She explained that this process was beneficial because they sometimes exchanged references and talked in more depth about the assignment topic. For example, Beth was able to answer her questions about the number of references needed and the word limit for their first assignment. As the deadline for their assignment came nearer they were in constant communication as they shared their ongoing word counts. They supported each other when their motivation and enthusiasm was low and they were both relieved when they discovered that their assignment was due several hours later than they had first expected. They reported

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that at the time they had appreciated this reciprocal support. They also found that it was helpful to debrief once they were finished. After their grades were made available, Beth was in a panic until Georgie found out from Moodle how to interpret the calculations. She was able to calm Beth down and reassure her that she had in fact passed this assignment. They shared what their grades were and they reported that they both had received the same sort of marks. Beth good humouredly, commented that it was a relief that someone else had achieved as poorly as she had in this first assignment.

In Beth's responses to the questionnaire, she agreed that her study buddy was helpful for her learning and that she had provided encouragement for Georgie. This experience however, was not understood in the same way by Georgie who said in her questionnaire that she did not find her study buddy was helpful for her learning or had provided her with encouragement. Georgie's change in viewpoint regarding her peer support partnership was given at the end of this study, after she had been out of contact with Beth for a period of time. Georgie did agree however that she had provided encouragement for her study buddy and had answered questions promptly.

When Beth was asked about establishing a new peer support partnership, she explained that it required commitment and effort from each person. In her other papers, Beth did not want a study buddy because most of these learners were older than she was. She added that she would also prefer someone with a casual attitude who was not too focussed on academic study all the time. Beth believed that an ideal study buddy would be friendly, helpful, willing to ask for or offer advice and make suggestions. She went on to explain that this study buddy would not "want to hold on to their own ideas for themselves and be more willing to help other people succeed." Her strategy for finding a new study buddy would involve referring to learner profiles and the social forum. Beth suggested that if learners used the social forum they were more likely to want to be involved in peer support as they would be interested in being sociable.

At her individual interview Georgie also recommended self selection for finding a new partner. She believed that communication was essential for building a partnership and each study buddy should make an effort to send at least one email a week. Georgie thought that two emails a month was not enough to maintain a partnership. She noted that each message

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needed to only say a few words such as ‘hello, how are you?’ Georgie placed value, as Beth did, on a face-to-face meeting to help build a peer support partnership. Her advice included having a partner who was at a similar stage or ability with their learning because she believed that it was unfair if one partner had to do all the explaining and supporting.

At the beginning of the semester, Beth and Georgie kept in regular contact. Beth explained however, that as the weeks went by and the demands of their academic study increased, they did not communicate so often with each other. On one occasion, when Georgie did not reply promptly Beth went to her house to visit her but she was not there. Fortunately, by this stage of the paper, Beth had become more confident using Moodle and had found the answer to her question online. The Moodle software also proved helpful when Beth eventually located the necessary information to answer one of Georgie’s questions. Beth explained that in the future, if she had a problem and her study buddy did not know the answer, then she would ask others in the social forum for assistance. By way of contrast, Georgie did not use social forum and she did not ask the lecturer for help. Beth explained that now she had gained in confidence she thought that ‘perhaps’ she would, in the future, ask the lecturer for help.

After approximately six weeks using peer support there was a breakdown in Beth’s and Georgie’s communication and the support they provided each other. Beth had emailed Georgie with the idea that they should brainstorm ideas for their second assignment but she did not receive a reply. A few weeks later, Beth wrote in her diary that she had again emailed Georgie because she still had not heard back. Finally, Georgie replied after a three week gap and apologised for her absence. She explained that she had returned to her parents’ home (in another city) for an extended visit. By this time the first semester had ended and they did not resume contact.

### *Online learning experience*

This was Beth’s first experience of online learning while Georgie had some previous experience. Beth struggled initially with the isolation of online learning and she said “I found it really hard because you do feel like you are all alone.” In an email to Georgie she described her concerns in this way: “Have you used online learning before? I haven’t and I am finding it difficult to motivate myself – I think I need to make myself a fake lecture timetable!” Beth was worried that not having any face-to-face contact with other learners, as she did in her on-

campus papers, would impact on her achievement. She explained “you could be off on a complete tangent and you wouldn't know until you got your marks back.”

Like Beth, Georgie did not enjoy online learning and lacked motivation “I am really not liking this whole online, teach yourself thing, don't quite have enough discipline to make myself.” At the end of the study, Georgie reported that she still lacked confidence using online learning, discussion forum and Moodle. Her responses matched the low levels of confidence she had also reported at the beginning of the semester. At her individual interview, Beth explained that she was motivated to achieve the participation grade because it was worth ten percent. In contrast, Georgie's low contribution rate reflected an apparent lack of concern about attaining this grade. In her questionnaire responses, Beth recalled that at the beginning of the semester she lacked confidence with online learning, discussion forum and Moodle but by the end of this study she was much more confident in all three areas. While Beth went online three times a week and responded to others twice a week, Georgie went online once a week and responded on one occasion to another learner in C.M.C.

They were opposite in their views (Beth agreed and Georgie disagreed) that an online course was an efficient means of communicating with others in their paper. Neither agreed that an online course allows for social interaction and they did not feel part of their class. Georgie explained “it's just hard to actually get involved and then you feel outside of what's going on.” They both strongly disagreed that an online paper provides a personal experience similar to the experience in an on-campus classroom.

### **Case study 3 - Fiona & Daniel**

Fiona and Daniel worked full-time in education while studying part-time in this, their final compulsory paper, for their postgraduate qualification. Fiona was in the 41-50 year age group and had chosen to return to study three years earlier to upgrade her qualifications. Daniel was in the 51-60 year age group and he was upgrading his qualifications because of pressure from his employers. He intended to study for his master's degree part-time over the next two years. At the end of the first semester, Fiona debated the value of continuing her academic study towards a master's degree and wrote in her diary “perhaps I should just stick to my day job - which is my priority.”

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Fiona and Daniel often travelled for work and they found it challenging to study and cope with their family, work and other life commitments. In Fiona's words "it's a real juggling act." She completed her online work at night, sometimes reluctantly, or because she felt pressured to complete requirements. She explained "I just don't bother and then guilt gets to me. {...} Last night it built up and [there is] amazing peace of mind when I finish something." At the final focus group interview, Fiona also expressed concern about her lack of motivation. She said:

You know there are times I'm thinking why am I doing this? Because you get so busy with work and it actually takes the pleasure out of doing recreational reading and activities like that. You know you just don't have time.

Daniel also found it difficult to remain motivated and explained "the reality is it is a challenge and I'm finding it more and more difficult to try and get that balance." He appreciated the flexibility online learning offered him and explained "online meets my needs and suits me better because I can be away [and] while I'm away and I can go online and dial up." He added that online learning is almost a "means to an end" for him.

Fiona and Daniel were family friends, were similar in age, worked in the same profession and shared the same pressure to balance their lives. Fiona said "we talk about how we're going to fit this [academic study] in with the day job." Their views were similar, in that they both appeared to be somewhat reluctant participants in the paper. This was evidenced in an email Daniel sent to Fiona at the start of the semester. He said, "is it just me or does it seem harder to find the time to do this? And it is still only February – how are we going to manage the rest of the year?" According to Fiona, she and Daniel had similar perspectives about the content of their paper, they both understood each other and she was at ease with him as a person.

#### *The peer support partnership*

Daniel believed that having similar backgrounds, ages and an already established social connection was helpful for their study buddy partnership. Their partnership had "evolved" during the three previous online papers that they had taken together. Fiona described it as "a natural study buddy relationship as we were both 'older' students returning to academic study." Daniel also believed that their partnership was informal, unplanned and it had

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developed without much effort from them. They did not experience any difficulties remaining in contact and supporting each other for the duration of this study.

According to Fiona, peer support involved learners working together and facing the same concerns or problems at the same time. At the first focus group interview Fiona, good humouredly, explained that peer support would be better named as “peer commiseration” because learners are able to share the pain of academic study with each other. She reported that knowing that Daniel was experiencing similar concerns, as she was, helped her to focus on her own learning. She noted that a study buddy unquestionably needed to be in the same paper, otherwise learners would not have enough in common and they would not worry about the same things. Fiona believed that a peer support connection involved liking your partner or you probably would not want to work together. She described being involved in peer support was reassuring because you know that “someone else is looking out for you.”

Fiona and Daniel thought that the opportunity to ask a study buddy a “dumb” or “stupid” question was helpful because they knew that he or she was probably wondering about the same issue. Fiona and Daniel believed that when they had a problem they would receive a ‘judgement free’ response from their partner. Fiona explained that they had a lot of fun comparing their experiences and when she had difficulties she would ask her study buddy for help rather than the lecturer. Daniel however was confident asking either his study buddy or the lecturer for assistance. Fiona was grateful for Daniel’s support because when neither of them knew the answer, Daniel was prepared to contact the lecturer and then pass on the relevant information.

Fiona and Daniel were in agreement, that having a study buddy was helpful for their learning and had provided encouragement. They also agreed that they had answered their study buddy’s questions promptly and their buddy had answered their questions without delay. In Fiona’s words “we offered mutual support and encouragement. Hey there, I noticed you haven’t done this yet. Where are you?” In this partnership, Fiona and Daniel mainly used text and email to contact each other. They had two face-to-face meetings but also made phone calls when they needed to clarify a more complex issue. Daniel explained that their face-to-face meetings were a chance for them to catch up with other aspects of their lives and to motivate each other to continue with their academic study.

For example, on one occasion when they were lacking motivation, they found that a face-to-face meeting refocused their attention on their academic work. When this problem occurred, Daniel wrote in his diary “struggling to get into it this year - sent an email to Fiona and said that I was finding it hard to find the time for the reading and then to add to the discussion threads.” Fiona replied “am struggling already too! Haven’t done them either. Weekend work again.” Two weeks later they were both still concerned about their workload and Fiona emailed that she was feeling overwhelmed with all the course related work that she still had to complete. She asked Daniel to meet her for a coffee. At this meeting they provided emotional support for each other. Daniel recorded in his diary that it was “good to share where we both were at and see that we both have similar problems/issues. Main thing we are both struggling with is time. Trying to fit in the readings and responses online.” They left this meeting having identified a common goal which was to complete their academic work. Later that night Fiona wrote in her diary that Daniel had sent a text to say that he had already completed his task.

Fiona reported that there were three main areas where their study buddy partnership had developed. The first area was concerned with interpreting assignment requirements and especially understanding the questions. She described their support as “two-thirds academic and one third social”. Fiona explained that she enjoyed having a study buddy to discuss the course content with because this process allowed them to clarify their ideas. In her words: “it is a really supportive thing to have somebody to bounce ideas off.” Daniel also described their discussions as a chance to check to see that they both knew what the assignment required of them and that they were on the right track with their learning and assessment tasks.

Secondly, sending regular texts when they were writing assignments were helpful because they would compare their progress and word counts. They noted that there was more contact when assignments were due and they both found this beneficial. Daniel emphasised that they had never read or proof read each other’s assignments. With good humour, Daniel said to Fiona “I couldn’t put you through that anyway.” They reported that although they shared and commiserated over grades, they did not help each other with any academic work or the supply of scholarly articles. Fiona noted “I have got one disadvantage of having my buddy because he gets better marks than me.”

Another method used to build their partnership was their strategy of responding to each other’s C.M.C. contributions. They both believed that this was another way that they

supported each other and they each valued their study buddy's feedback and encouragement. Daniel said "I know that generally Fiona will respond to the things that I put and I will respond to hers too." Fiona explained that although she was sometimes tired, receiving a text from Daniel would often motivate her to go online. Their text to each other would often say "this is your conscience speaking." Fiona explained "it prompts you when your conscience works." They reported that having a text from 'their conscience' was motivational and they would then find the time to contribute to the C.M.C.

When Fiona was asked about establishing a new peer support partnership, she identified voluntary involvement and the choosing of one's own partner as key factors. Daniel however, believed that the basis for a new partnership was establishing a connection between the two people. He explained that knowing the person and having contact with them prior to establishing the partnership would be helpful. Daniel was certain that he would prefer to work alone rather than be matched with someone he did not know. For other partnerships, he recommended that some guidance about the benefits of peer support and strategies to help learners to get started would be useful. Daniel believed that prospective partners need to decide together how they intended to build their relationship. He also noted that for some learners, their experiences at university (online and on-campus), can be isolating and peer support may well provide the advice and guidance to help them to adjust to the environment.

#### *The online learning experience*

Initially, Fiona expressed doubts about the course software – Moodle. At the same time, Daniel did not seem as apprehensive of the new software and was prepared to make an effort to understand how it was organised. Fiona was familiar with and initially preferred, Blackboard software, as she had used it in her previous online papers. With Moodle, she was unable to see how the threads of discussion developed and it seemed to her, that some learners' contributions were unrelated to the topic. She explained that it was not as satisfying to be involved in this type of learning. By the end of the first semester however, Fiona reported that she was more confident and had adjusted to the Moodle software.

The notion of the online learning experience being dependent on learner collaboration was confirmed when Daniel explained that if his C.M.C. postings received no response he often felt discouraged. For him, it was particularly disappointing when he had provided an in-depth contribution and then no-one replied to his ideas. He did not think that the provision of a

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grade for online participation was an effective means for ensuring quality contributions. Daniel explained however, that on one occasion he too had provided a concise response in order to achieve his participation grade.

Fiona did not use the social forum and she cited age, lack of interest and a shortage of time as her reasons for this decision. At the beginning of the paper Daniel looked at the social forum but did not use it again. He regarded chat rooms and instant messaging as optional extras and explained “I’ve tended to just do the entries that we have to do and comment on those rather than any of the other sort of frilly bits.” His previous experience in other papers had influenced his views because learners had found that it was often difficult selecting a suitable time to use the chat room.

In her responses to the questionnaire, Fiona said she was confident about online learning, enjoyed the paper, believed that it allowed for social interaction and she felt part of the class. The number of her online visits for the paper varied but it was usually twice a week and she responded to at least one person as well as Daniel during that time. In his responses, Daniel said that he was also confident about online learning and he logged onto his paper on a daily basis and responded three times a week to other learners and once to Fiona. Neither Fiona nor Daniel believed that online learning could provide the personal experience learners gain from involvement in an on-campus classroom. In Daniel’s words “I don’t think it is a class” and “online is fine for certain things but if you really want that richness of conversation and connections {...} there’s just no comparison.” He believed that you could not compare “the depth of understanding and the depth of responses you get online compared to when you’re having a face-to-face conversation.”

## **Summary**

This chapter has shown that the six participants had different experiences of and opinions about peer support. One pair had previous experience, one pair was matched and in the other, one study buddy selected a new partner. Overall, participants believed that instead of matching, it would be better to select your own partner. Some participants enjoyed ‘bouncing’ ideas’ with their study buddy about the content of the paper and they used this approach as a way to clarify their thoughts. Other support was mainly related to understanding the assignment and providing reminders for each other. Participants also gave their study buddy

feedback and offered encouragement when motivation was low. They all appreciated having another learner to ask questions of rather than approaching their lecturer for advice. In this study one partnership (Fiona and Daniel) was successful. The other two partnerships provided support for each other for part of the semester until there was a breakdown in their communication.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion

This chapter provides a discussion and analysis of participants' experiences in answer to my research question 'How does peer support benefit online learners?' My two sub questions 'What issues do peer support partners face?' and 'In what ways does peer support meet partners' needs?' are also addressed within this chapter. Within each section in this chapter, the uniqueness of each participant and their partnership are identified, patterns of commonality are discussed and differences are highlighted as they relate to the literature. The first section describes the different ways participants built their peer support partnership. Discussion then turns to the benefits of peer support as experienced by participants. Some of the disadvantages of peer support are highlighted. Then issues faced by peer support partners are discussed and the chapter concludes by addressing the different ways that peer support helped to meet partners' needs.

#### **Establishing a peer support partnership**

One partnership (Fiona and Daniel) was self-selected, I matched participants (Beth and Georgie) in another and in the third partnership Cassie was matched and she later selected a Emma as her new partner. I considered that Cassie and Emma's partnership was self-selected because of their social connection before Emma joined this study. When Cassie asked Emma to be her peer support partner I expected that the friendship she mentioned in her email would have provided the foundation for them to build a partnership. Edwards and Gordon (2006), Single and Muller (2001) and Zachary (2000) noted that the basis for developing a partnership often depends on finding something in common with the other person. For Cassie and Emma, their initial connection was only for a few weeks and this proved to be an insufficient time for them to get to know each other before they volunteered to use peer support. A relationship must be nurtured but with Cassie and Emma this did not happen. They did not spend time finding out about each other and preparing their partnership. Information about interests,

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experiences and encouraging volunteers to get to know each other before matching would be useful strategies for establishing future peer support partnerships.

The most successful partnership I judged to be that of Fiona and Daniel. Zachary (2000) noted that the critical step is establishing a relationship and as Fiona and Daniel were already friends their partnership was built on a strong social connection. Their success may have been due to reasons such as; they were better at using and providing support compared with other participants or because they knew each other extremely well. Other reasons may be that they were older or they had already supported each other for over three years. Their partnership was reciprocal and there was a balance between asking and answering questions, giving feedback and providing motivation for each other. Fiona and Daniel also had clear boundaries about how their partnership operated and they did not read each other's work for assessment or provide academic article citations for each other.

When matching, a consideration of prospective partner's interests, skills and experiences may ensure that there are some common traits before choosing to work together (Single & Muller, 2001). Participants had different views about the attributes a new peer support partner needed. One participant suggested reading profile information about likely candidates before selecting a match. Beth described her ideal partner as being organised and proactive because in their partnership neither of them had this attribute. Beth considered that a proactive partner would be more likely to actively initiate contact with a partner which would help to build the partnership. Her views differ from Emma's when she suggested that participants should take turns to initiate contact and provide reciprocal support.

Beth also preferred someone in her own age group and not too focussed on academic study for a partner. Her matched partner, Georgie, met this criteria but their partnership faltered anyway. The critical factor in this partnership was the lack of commitment from Georgie to remain in contact. Their partnership was also not based on a social connection. Georgie, however, thought that it would be better to work with someone who was in the same academic programme rather than having (as she and Beth did) only one paper in common. This would mean that they had more to talk about and their connection may well have continued for much longer.

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Another way of helping the development of a peer support partnership would be to use a briefing meeting (online or on-campus). Emma, Georgie and Daniel had similar views about making contact with a prospective partner and believed that at least one face-to-face meeting would be helpful. Daniel, in particular, favoured face-to-face interaction. He was unsure if he could provide support for someone that he had never met. Cassie and Daniel recommended that an outline of key ideas about peer support provided at the time of recruitment would be helpful. Although participants in this study were given a list of peer support strategies (see Appendix C) at their briefing meeting, it would have perhaps been more useful to have reinforced these ideas throughout the study. These guidelines may have helped focus Cassie and Beth and encouraged them to sustain their communication with their partners and for Cassie to adopt some peer support strategies.

Participants thought that friendship, finding one's own partner and communication on a regular basis were essential for building a successful partnership. Matched partners, Beth and Georgie, reported that in retrospect it would have been better to have found their own partners. Eby and Lockwood (2005) noted that often mismatches occur and this is what happened with Beth's and Georgie's partnership. Although they reported that they initially enjoyed their peer support experience, their partnership was not sustained when one partner did not continue to provide support. The responsibility for building a relationship is dependent on those involved because an outsider, such as a programme coordinator, is not able to make demands of the participants (Edwards & Gordon, 2006; Zachary, 2000). In this study, Daniel expressed similar views to that reported in the literature when he recommended that a peer support partnership should be allowed to develop in a natural way and it should not be manipulated. Therefore, the requirement for weekly emails or the use of a peer support template would not necessarily work for Daniel's notion of an ideal partnership. As peer support is an informal partnership, it would also not be realistic to make learner involvement a compulsory part of any paper. As previously stated providing guidelines for prospective partners may prove to be helpful and this would give learners an idea about what was likely to happen when they used peer support.

Two participants (Georgie and Daniel) believed that peer support would work equally as well on-campus and online. Daniel noted that it would be particularly beneficial for new online or on-campus learners. Similarly, Georgie reported that she may have been more motivated to attend her on-campus classes if she had used peer support during this time. She obviously

regarded a study buddy as the friend who would encourage, support and be keen to meet up with her during her on-campus classes.

The results in this study suggest that if lecturers want to encourage learners in their paper to use peer support partnerships as an aid to facilitating a positive online educational experience it is not enough to merely suggest that learners simply find a study buddy. Lecturers also need to provide learners with a list of suggestions as to what might make a successful peer support partnership. Some hints from this study for fostering an effective peer support partnership:

1. Find out about and get to know your partner
2. Be friendly, positive, helpful and encourage your partner to learn
3. Keep in close contact with your partner - using email, phone, skype or face book.
4. Show initiative and find ways to help your partner e.g. provide reminders
5. Send informal emails to ask how they are getting on with their academic study and life in general
6. When your partner posts on C.M.C. - reply or send an email giving feedback
7. Provide encouragement when times are challenging
8. Answer your partner's emails in a timely way
9. Ask your partner for advice or ask a question whenever you are unsure about what to do in your academic study
10. Answer your partner's questions promptly and if you are not able to, then suggest he or she contact other learners in the community

### **The benefits of a peer support partnership**

In this study, all participants reported benefits from using peer support. In particular, Beth, Georgie, Fiona and Daniel found that knowing that someone else was struggling with or was concerned about the same issue, such as the starting date for the paper, was helpful. In these situations they were able to provide this information for each other. Their experiences confirm those of previous studies that identified a positive outcome when learners experience similar problems because the solution is often discovered by working together (Cain et al., 2003; Kear, 2004). Initially participants made connections with their partners and regarded them more as a 'friend' than just another learner in their paper. They identified benefits in having a specific person to contact and were happy to help each other when there was a problem to

solve. Similarly, all six participants reported that it was helpful having a partner to ask straightforward questions that they did not want to ask their lecturer or another learner. They appreciated this support, in much the same way as Ouzts' (2006) participants, who reported that they valued learning from each other much more than learning from the course material. Georgie, Fiona and Daniel specifically mentioned that a peer support partner was someone they could ask anything of without feeling embarrassed. With peer support, once partners had formed a connection they usually felt comfortable discussing any issues that concerned them. They found that contacting another learner for support or guidance was easier than asking the lecturer for help.

The opportunity for participants to discuss the content of their paper and their learning with a partner was beneficial. Beth's, Georgie's, Fiona's and Daniel's experiences were in line with Eun (2008), McLoughlin and Marshall (2000) and Vygotsky (1978) who reported that taking an active role in learning contributes to cognitive growth. Fiona and Daniel found that their lively discussion in C.M.C. helped them to clarify their ideas and understanding about the content of their paper and their experiences reflected Vygotsky's social constructivist learning theory. Cassie and Emma entered the course with different knowledge to share and they reported that talking through their experiences and ideas was helpful. As a result they clarified their thinking and learned about another perspective which confirmed Tam's (2000) findings that there are multiple pathways to achieve learning. Beth and Georgie enjoyed course related discussion and also found that they liked to complain about issues concerning their experiences in the paper. They found it was motivational to grumble as this process helped focus them on the learning task and reassured them that they were not the only learner to experience problems.

Another characteristic of Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist learning was reported by Georgie when she explained that Beth was able to strengthen her own ideas when they discussed the content of their paper. Only one participant, Emma explicitly reported that she had provided scaffolding for her partner. Emma was the more confident learner in this partnership and she was in the position to provide scaffolding. As a result Emma helped Cassie to build on her previous knowledge and become more self-directed when she initially did not understand an assignment. Emma went beyond the support that another partner may have been expected to provide in a similar situation and this caused problems because Cassie became more dependent on Emma's assistance. The other participants reported that they

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relied on email, phone calls or a text to support their partners when there were more complicated issues to discuss.

The beginning of the academic year is a time when learners often appreciate receiving extra support (Liu et al., 2007; Selby & Ryba, 1999). The experiences of these participants confirmed those of participants in earlier studies. In the first few weeks of their paper, their peer support partner helped to solve problems and motivated them to participate in C.M.C. The ease with which partners solved each other's problems at the beginning of the year highlights this as the ideal time to promote the benefits of peer support. Potentially, it would be helpful to contact learners on enrolment to recommend that they use peer support rather than waiting until the paper commenced. If this happened for Fiona and Cassie, who were faced with the practical problem of learning how to log on to their paper, then this would have likely provided them with a more positive start to their academic study. Luckily for Cassie, her partner gave her advice to help her with the transition from on-campus to online learning. Unfortunately for Beth, her partner did not join this study until later in the semester and so individual support for her at this critical time was not available.

In any future peer support partnership, participants recommended that the objective should be reciprocal support. This worked for Fiona and Daniel who identified reciprocal support as the focus of their partnership. Their partnership was balanced because each seemingly received as much as they gave to their partner. They found that it was reassuring to know that their partner always provided them with feedback, encouragement and friendly reminders about work that was due for completion. Therefore, a reciprocal approach where each partner is committed to provide support is an important goal for a successful peer support partnership. In contrast, Emma was disappointed about the lack of support she received from Cassie although she provided her with a range of different support. For six weeks, Beth and Georgie provided reciprocal support. They answered questions, provided encouragement and gave feedback to each other. When communication between them ceased, so did this support. Cassie's, Emma's, Beth's and Georgie's experiences prove the literature (e.g. Salmon, 2001; Single & Muller, 2001; Zachary, 2000) which recommended that communication links contribute to the building of a successful relationship.

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*Disadvantages of peer support*

Participants experienced several disadvantages when they used peer support. In this study, Cassie requested the most help but she did not provide the same level of support for her partner. It may not have been possible for her to provide the type of support that Emma would have valued because there was a noticeable difference in their confidence levels using online learning. Most of Cassie's requests for support were for academic and practical assistance. In contrast, Emma was more interested in providing and receiving emotional support and making a social connection with her partner. If Cassie had responded to Emma's emails using an informal greeting then she may well have been able to meet Emma's need for social connection and more likely to provide reciprocal support.

Cassie reported at the end of the study that peer support was a personal disadvantage for her. She explained that being involved in peer support required her to care and worry about someone else. At the same time however, she believed that caring about someone else would also provide her with more practice communicating with people. It was as if Cassie was unaware, that she too, had a role to play in their partnership. English is Cassie's second language and her reluctance to think about her partner's needs may be because her priority was to understand the course content. After a positive start, Cassie and Emma's partnership deteriorated when Cassie requested additional support with her online learning, assignments and academic study. Her requests went beyond what was intended, or expected, in a peer support partnership. Cassie also had misinterpreted what she saw as Emma's role in their partnership when she requested editing assistance. Emma, in her attempt to support their partnership and to not offend her partner tried to be helpful. Unfortunately, this extra support added to Emma's personal workload and made it an unequal partnership. Peer support partners need to not only provide a timely response but also achieve a balance between receiving and giving support. Some learners may feel that the obligation to meet these goals discourages them from forming relationships with other learners in their community.

In a future study, the researcher's group emails could be used to review the purpose and the reciprocal nature of peer support. Some of the issues participants experienced when their relationship was not working as it should, were likely due to a lack of reciprocity or a misunderstanding about what was expected from them in a peer support partnership. Single and Muller (2001) reported that coaching tips via email are an effective strategy for helping learners. For example, in this study I could have sent emails reminding peer support partners

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to encourage each other to contribute to C.M.C. before the deadline or suggesting they provide feedback about their partner's posting. This process would hopefully encourage more participation in C.M.C. and contribute to the building of the partnership. Learning or developing the strategies to support another person proved difficult for some participants. Although Emma tried to encourage Cassie to provide support she was not successful. Crossland (1997) and O'Neill et al. (2005) found that learners may become more familiar with the strategies when they use them during practice. Unfortunately for Cassie's and Emma's partnership, this did not happen. Although Emma modelled giving feedback, providing encouragement and reminders, Cassie did not implement any of these strategies. In their partnership the support was one-sided. It did appear to be successful on the surface for the several weeks before they encountered problems. The critical event occurred when Cassie ceased to participate in C.M.C. and did not reply to her partner's emails. Her absence worried Emma. All that was required in this situation was an email message from Cassie to inform Emma that she had taken leave from the paper. It was not until Cassie explained her absence at the first focus group interview that Emma found out the reason for the lack of communication. When participants acknowledged or shared responsibility their partnership was more likely to be successful. It would perhaps have been easier if these two participants had taken turns at initiating contact and providing encouragement for each other.

Another solution to these communication problems may be to ask partners to agree to exchange weekly or at least regular emails. This is in line with Edwards and Gordon (2006), Single and Muller (2001) and Zachary (2000) who reported that taking the initiative to remain in contact assists with relationship building. Weekly emails to partners may possibly have helped Georgie to maintain contact with Beth and have contributed to the building of their partnership. The email message may be directly related to the paper content or simply be sent to make a social connection. This strategy however, may also have resulted in participants emailing out of duty rather than for a meaningful purpose. It is not the intention to align peer support with peer learning by imposing specific requirements as this would likely be counterproductive. Peer support is informal and it is more effective to allow each partnership the flexibility to develop in a natural manner without imposing any rules or requirements.

Another difficulty for some partnerships occurred when the answer to a request for support was not received at all or in a timely manner. Dzakiria (2008) and Hawkrigde (2003) noted that in any situation (with a lecturer or a learner) such a delay may cause frustration. This was

most apparent when Georgie, who had gone for an extended visit to another city, did not respond to her partner's requests for guidance. On one occasion, Beth tried different methods to contact Georgie but eventually she found her answer on a Moodle forum. Although Beth's peer support partnership had failed to meet her needs at this time, she had adapted to the online environment and received her answer from the wider learning community.

### **Issues faced by peer support partners**

There were a number of issues that participants experienced during the time they used peer support. The issues included below were described in participants' data and included balancing academic study with home life, motivation, adjusting to online learning, responding to power differences between lecturers and learners, partner's paper related discussion, participation grade, the learning community and responding to the need for social connection. The different ways partners experienced and responded to these issues are described in this section.

#### *Balance*

It is well documented in the literature that for some learners, balancing personal lives, employment with full or part-time academic study is challenging (Lake, 1999; Moller, 1998; Wiesenberg, 2001). Online learners are more likely to include learners who are employed full-time while they study and for them finding a balance in their life often prove to be a problem. The only part-time learners in this study, Fiona and Daniel, reported that finding time for their academic study, full time employment and family life was demanding. Fiona and Daniel had already been working professionally for six weeks before the beginning of the academic year and they needed to reorganise their already busy schedules to find additional time to participate in the paper. They began the paper reluctantly and took time to become motivated. Fiona and Daniel found that because their peer support partner also faced the same issue of balancing their commitments with academic study they were able to find ways to cope. They both supported each other particularly when there were challenging times in the paper and with their employment. They completed their academic study at home and found it difficult to ignore family or other commitments. With the other peer support partners Beth had a part-time job while Emma, Cassie and Georgie were full-time learners. Emma and Georgie did not report any difficulties balancing their lives. Cassie, however, reported that she struggled with

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her life as a full-time learner but her experiences may have been compounded by health issues. It appears that coping strategies depend on the individual learner and their unique needs. The benefit from having a peer support partner is that there is someone else who knows what it is you are experiencing and, as in Fiona's and Daniels' partnership, provide some welcome encouragement.

### *Motivation*

Motivation is often challenged during online papers when learners attempt to meet assessment and C.M.C. deadlines. In this study, Beth, Georgie, Fiona and Daniel contacted their partners to provide encouragement as well as such things as an ongoing word count for their essay as they worked to complete their assignment. Beth and Georgie also found that their partner's encouragement motivated them to continue with their assignment preparation. Often as a result of these motivational messages they reported that they were persuaded to continue with their academic study. Emma regarded her reminders to her partner as providing an informal nudge in the right direction. After receiving encouragement from a partner some participants were more motivated to contribute to C.M.C. Fiona's and Daniel's strategy when their motivation was low was to arrange a face-to-face meeting. This meeting inspired them to go on and complete the task they had initially struggled to begin. Instead of meeting face-to-face, other participants used the telephone for these longer motivational discussions. It seems that from participants' experiences particularly during assignment preparation they appreciated contact with and motivation from their study buddy as it helped them to focus.

### *Online learning*

Online learning received mixed reviews from participants who also had experience learning in on-campus papers. Participants were not committed to the purpose of the online learning environment because in their questionnaires they did not agree that an online paper presents a personal experience similar to an on-campus paper. Their views may have impacted on their peer support experiences as participants were not convinced that the online environment was the most effective way for them to learn.

Online learners working at home on their computer may regard this experience as a separate and/or solitary part of their day because they are not interacting face-to-face with other people. Emma, in particular, reported that this was her experience and she felt isolated as a

result. Unfortunately, Emma was unlikely to change her mind about online learning unless she experienced the benefit from more learners participating in C.M.C. She wanted other learners to value the building of the community in the same way that she did. Her views were interesting because she reported that she only contributed the minimum to C.M.C. in order to receive her participation grade. She did not see any need to provide further contributions which would also have helped build the learning community.

As educators, Daniel and Fiona did not consider that online learning was able to provide the depth of learning achieved in an on-campus classroom. Daniel identified the lack of face-to-face interaction as the main reason for his negative views about online learning. None-the-less, the online paper was an effective way for him to complete his academic study even when he was away from home. Online learning provides flexibility for those learners who want to study anywhere and anytime (Bourne & Bootle, 2005; Moller, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Wiesenberg, 2001). Daniel found that as in the literature this flexibility suited his life style. Fiona however, did not regard the flexibility of online learning as an advantage. She struggled to find time for academic study when she was working and admitted that she usually completed tasks in the evenings or weekends.

New online learners often take time to adapt to the online learning environment and they often develop strategies to help them (Wiesenberg, 2001). Cassie and Beth were in this same situation. They faced additional challenges compared with those learners who had more online experience. Baglione and Nastanski (2007), Bernard et al. (2000) and Keppell et al. (2006) reported that online learning provides a learner with freedom from a lecture schedule. Beth's and Georgie's experiences refute this literature. Their attitudes towards online learning were perhaps self fulfilling because they both began this paper with predetermined opinions about the purpose and nature of online learning. Beth explained how she considered making an imaginary timetable to help balance her academic study with her personal life. Interestingly, Georgie regarded online learning as a "teach yourself" approach. She had not considered that there was a community, consisting of the lecturer and other learners available to support her learning. They both were of the belief that it was only their study buddy who would help them.

An important finding from this study is that online lecturers need to challenge preconceptions about online learning before it can work the way it is intended. It was unlikely that Beth's and

Georgie's views changed during the paper although later in the first semester Beth reported that she was now more confident using online learning. She was an excellent example of a reluctant learner who once she gained confidence was more involved online, enjoyed participating in the paper and was satisfied with her learning. In contrast, her partner, Georgie, who only contributed once to C.M.C., did not enjoy the paper. Beldarrain (2006), Ouzts (2006) and Palloff and Pratt (1999) found that motivating learners to participate in C.M.C. is helpful as it is likely to enhance their satisfaction and contribute to a positive educational experience. Therefore, encouraging Georgie in particular to contribute may have changed her views but this may have been a challenging prospect for her partner.

### *Isolation*

Often online learners feel isolated from others in their class and the wider university community. This experience may leave some of these learners less likely to develop social presence and to have the motivation to regularly participate in C.M.C. (Picciano, 2002; Rourke et al., 2001). Similarly, four participants (Emma, Cassie, Beth and Georgie) reported that they felt isolated during their academic study. Emma thought that there was little that could be done to improve what she got out of this paper because she did not 'see' other people. The two new online learners (Cassie and Beth) found they initially struggled with online learning because they also did not meet up with other learners as they had experienced in their on-campus papers. By the end of the semester however, Cassie stated that the more she was involved in contributing to the paper, the more she enjoyed her academic study. Active participation in C.M.C. appears to be one way for learners to become more involved in their learning and this process helps them to avoid feelings of being disconnected from others in their paper (Lapadat, 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). The peer support partnership also helped participants in this study to feel less isolated. Fiona and Beth explained that knowing that their buddy was concerned and cared about them was beneficial.

### *Power*

Emma was the only participant to report that for her the power differences between her as a learner and the lecturer seemed to even out in her online paper. She appreciated that the online lecturer would not recognise her in the same way as she can be 'known' in an on-campus class. Emma regarded her computer as a helpful 'barrier'. From behind this safety zone she recognised the opportunity she had to interact more directly and confidently with her lecturer.

Power difference was also to the forefront when it comes to asking the lecturer for academic advice. Five participants reported that they would not ask their lecturer for academic guidance or administration information. In this study, Daniel was the only participant who ever asked the lecturer for assistance and this only happened when Fiona was unable to provide help. Participants' reluctance to ask their lecturer may be because the same lecturer graded their work and perhaps they preferred to remain anonymous. They also may not have wanted to appear that they were unable to understand the course material. It is therefore important for lecturers to encourage learners in their paper to contact them for assistance rather than have them worry about not having the necessary information. Peer support partners who do not know the answer should remind their partner to ask these questions of the learning community (which also includes the lecturer).

#### *Partners' paper related discussion*

Early in the first semester, Emma and Cassie engaged in learning centred discussions (face-to-face and by email) to clarify their ideas about the topics in their paper. They found this experience was motivational as they were able to build on their previous experiences and learning. In contrast, Fiona and Daniel used C.M.C. to develop their understandings about a topic. They were the only participants who deliberately responded to their partner's C.M.C. contributions but these were in addition to those they made to other learners. Involvement in a C.M.C. discussion where learners' contribute their ideas about the current topic, challenge others' perspectives and provide feedback enhances their learning (Beldarrain, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Tam, 2000). Similarly, Fiona and Daniel relied on always getting at least one response from their partner for each contribution they made to C.M.C. and for them this was motivational. By way of contrast, Emma believed that always responding to one particular person often closes off the discussion from other learners who may want to participate. She believed that learners would be reluctant to interrupt and provide their own opinions about the topic if they saw that two people in C.M.C. were having a 'private' conversation.

Only one participant (Daniel) mentioned his feelings of disappointment when there were no responses or only superficial replies to his contributions in C.M.C. Daniel's views were conflicted because he also admitted that on occasion he had posted brief responses in order to meet the participation requirement. Emma however, reported that it was motivational when she received a response on the same day that she contributed her message. For more

immediate responses all learners would need to be online more regularly and they would need to contribute to C.M.C. more often. Active participation and building on another learner's ideas in C.M.C. may be empowering and motivational (Beldarrain, 2006; Kim & Moore, 2005; Murphy et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2008) Cassie experienced this phenomenon when she reported that the more she was involved in C.M.C. the more she enjoyed her learning. Therefore, when learners are encouraged to participate in C.M.C. and they make links to the different ideas presented, the more likely they are to have a positive learning experience. Peer support partners who responded to their partner and at least one other learner would likely promote more interaction and help with building the learning community. This in turn would nurture a positive educational experience for all learners.

### *Participation grade*

Half of the participants reported that they contributed to C.M.C. in order to achieve the participation grade. According to Picciano (2002) and Rovai (2004) lecturers use a participation grade to encourage quality contributions. In this study, Emma and Daniel were strongly opposed to this strategy. They regularly contributed to C.M.C. but voiced concerns about the quality of work when learners contribute only because they want to achieve the grade. Fiona and Daniel often contacted each other on the day grades were awarded to offer a reminder about meeting the deadline. On some occasions they had been busy with their professional work or family life and if there had not been the incentive of a grade, they may not have persevered to contribute at such a late stage. Whenever time permitted, these two learners also contributed to some topics more often than the participation criteria required. In contrast, Emma's reluctance to continue her interactions beyond the formal requirement may have restricted the depth of her learning. Sinclair (2003) reported that some learners often regard their C.M.C. contributions as an assignment rather than considering the intended purpose which is to share ideas and learn together during discussion. In this study, some participants appeared to also regard their contributions to C.M.C. as an assignment and their achievement of the participation grade was their incentive. Others were perhaps pressed for time and only wanted to contribute the minimum. Online learners need to be encouraged from the outset to contribute willingly, and often, in order to gain the most from their learning. This will only be achieved if learners understand that the more they contribute the greater the depth of their learning would be and the wider the range of perspectives about the course content available. The purpose of online learning may need to be made more explicit in order to

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capture those learners who are unaware that participation in C.M.C. is fundamental to the learning process and not merely a grade to achieve.

### *Learning community*

In contrast to the literature (e.g. Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Palloff & Pratt, 1999) Cassie, Beth, Georgie and Daniel reported that they did not feel part of the class and did not have a sense of belonging to the learning community. When asked if they enjoyed the paper only three of these four agreed that they had. Georgie, the learner who seldom participated, had not enjoyed the paper. Her negative views about online learning however, in no way restricted her from gaining a pass in the paper but they did perhaps impact on her overall educational experience.

There were only two participants (Emma and Fiona) who acknowledged that they felt part of their online class. This was interesting because Emma only contributed the minimum while Fiona contributed more often. Fiona reflected the views of Rourke et al. (2001) and Swan (2002) who reported that the more learners participate the more likely they are to feel connected to other learners and their learning community. Emma believed that other learners would not feel so isolated if they were more involved in their paper and they participated more regularly in C.M.C. Online lecturers already strive to achieve this goal in their papers with mixed success as indicated by participants' experiences in this study.

### *Social connection*

Learners are able to establish social connections with others in their paper through the social forum (Moller, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Emma's decision to post the initial message on the social forum was motivated by her reported isolation and her wish to make informal contact with other learners. She attempted to encourage them to join her in the social forum when she said that she would "put the jug on" as if she was inviting friends for a drink of tea. Her partner, Cassie, contributed to this 'virtual scene setting' when she explained that social forum was "not her cup of tea." The social forum is dependent upon learners' contributions but Emma found that in this paper, other learners were not interested in participating. This is in line with Brown (2001) and Liu et al. (2007) who noted that not all learners want to connect on a social basis. Cassie and Fiona reported that they were not interested in participating in the social forum and they cited their age as the reason. While

Daniel regarded the social forum and chat rooms as the “frilly bits” of the software and he did not see a need to be involved. Brown (2001) and Rovai (2004) reported that an effective approach involves the lecturer introducing the social forum and then withdrawing from this venue. Perhaps this strategy may have encouraged more participation in the paper as learners would hopefully get to know each other through these social connections. The lecturer’s modelling during the initial session may be the impetus that is needed to interest learners in contributing to the social forum and making informal connections with other learners. The social forum would be a way for peer support partners to get to know each other especially at the beginning of the semester. It is also important that peer support partners should open up their social connections to not rely solely on one person for all their support.

Profiles may also help learners to make connections although half of the participants only viewed these profiles once at the beginning of the year. Profiles may also be used throughout the paper but in this study Emma was the only participant who reported using them in this way. She found that some profiles lacked enough detail to give her a clear ‘picture’ of that learner and this would have impacted on their usefulness for her future reference. The relevance of learner profiles was not lost on Beth, who was the only participant to recommend using them to identify a future peer support partner. Augar et al. (2004) reported that profiles on a wiki encourage learners to make connections and learn more about others in their paper. The use of wikis in a future study may perhaps help learners find those people they would like to contact regarding initiating a peer support partnership. Social forum and profiles, as stated, allow learners to find out more about each other which would help peer support partners to build a partnership. It is possible that if Beth, Georgie, Cassie and Emma had achieved this goal their partnerships may have been established on a much stronger foundation and their communication with each other may have continued through their challenging episodes.

### **In what ways does peer support meet partners’ needs?**

At different times during this study participants provided academic, practical and/or emotional support for each other. Most of the academic support that participants provided centred on understanding assignment questions and making sure that their partner was working towards completion. Fiona and Daniel found that their academic discussion was usually centred on understanding the assignment requirements and discussing how their work was progressing. Other participants also highlighted assignment preparation as an opportunity

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for them to provide reciprocal support. They were in regular contact during this time when they shared their ongoing word counts and provided encouragement for each other. Three participants also provided their partner with an article citation. Emma, although reluctantly, was the only participant to read her partner's work. Half of the participants described concerns about knowing whether they were heading in the right direction and on the "right track" with their learning. Academic help was the most common support participants provided for their partner. The opportunity to receive feedback or guidance from a peer support partner at such a critical time was likely to contribute to their learning experience. Participants lacked confidence that they were completing the assignment as the lecturer had intended and this was why they sought support. The insecure feelings participants had about working on assignments were dispelled when their partners were able to support and encourage them to continue their preparation. It is evident that some participants were unable to follow or understand the course assignments and the suggestion is for clear criteria to be included in future papers.

Peer support partners provided each other with a range of other practical support. It was mainly focussed on using and becoming familiar with the Moodle software. Four peer support partners found that the introduction of Moodle software posed a challenge for them. In their previous papers Blackboard was the norm, while either Blackboard or Moodle were used in current papers. Emma was the only participant who easily coped with the change and she provided ongoing advice for her partner. Hudson et al. (1998), Moller (1998) and Wheeler (2006) found that often other learners provide solutions to minor technical problems. In this study, when one partner found the answer they usually passed on the relevant information. When participants were unable to locate administration guidelines that would tell them the word limit, the number of references to use for their first assessment and the date their paper recommenced in the second semester they usually asked their partner for help. Often these were issues that they were reluctant to ask the lecturer to help with or admit to other learners in the community that they were unsure about something that may have seemed obvious to others. One suggestion would be to include a Frequently Asked Questions (F.A.Q.) forum expressly written for the paper. This forum would have helped with the practical information participants sought during their paper. It may also be helpful for an introductory online session to the Moodle software as initially some participants initially struggled adapting to the change in software.

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Emotional support is often informal and may be just a greeting or a chance to catch up on personal news. Five participants mentioned that they contacted their partner to find out how they were coping with their academic study and to ask about their general well-being. In this study, all six participants found that friendship was important and they used greetings via email or texts to maintain their contact. Emma especially noted that the missing component in online learning for her was contact with other learners and receiving their emotional support. Emotional support was the one area that participants acknowledged was not readily available in their online paper. Therefore, having a peer support partner may well provide online learners with the emotional support they need to encourage them to continue to interact in their paper and enjoy their educational experience.

### **Summary**

The results in this study indicate similarities in participants' experiences of peer support which included benefits from providing motivation, giving feedback, answering questions and having the opportunity to learn together and to construct knowledge. The difference between partnerships was most noticeable in the ways partners contributed to the building of their relationship, their attempts to maintain communication links and the support they provided each other. Fiona's and Daniel's partnership flourished. It was based on friendship; they had previous experience supporting each other, were in regular contact, provided reciprocal support and gave feedback for their partner's C.M.C. contributions. They were also both busy in their home and professional lives yet managed to successfully complete their academic study.

Beth and Georgie supported each other effectively for half a semester before Beth moved temporarily to another city and was not in contact with her partner. They initially encouraged each other during assignment preparation and provided emotional support. The most challenging partnership was that of Emma and Cassie. In this partnership, Emma provided peer support for Cassie but it was not reciprocated. In retrospect, I think that Cassie did not understand the purpose and requirements of peer support. English was her second language and although she described a study buddy accurately at the beginning of the study her requests for support indicated that, as Emma suggested, she viewed her partner more as a tutor than a partner. Cassie's preference to work alone and not to be responsible for helping someone else indicates that perhaps peer support was not a strategy that she would naturally adopt in her

academic study. In retrospect, given Cassie's views about working with another learner it was interesting that she volunteered to use peer support. This may have occurred because she was puzzled about how peer support worked or that initially she wanted to use it but later realised that it was not working for her as she had hoped that it would.

The benefits of a peer support partnership rely on establishing a connection with another learner and this is an important start to building a partnership. A characteristic of a successful peer support partnership is that involvement is a decision each learner must make for themselves and the partnership should evolve naturally. For peer support to be successful there needs to be a connection between partners, a similar outlook and they have to be interested in helping another learner. In an ideal peer support partnership there would be regular communication (at least weekly), a commitment to the partnership as well as an understanding that they would provide reciprocal support. As a result of involvement in a peer support partnership learners would hopefully be more motivated to participate in C.M.C. and would likely enjoy their overall educational experience.

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## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusion

This chapter summarises the conclusions drawn from this study and provides suggestions for improving the benefits of peer support for future online learners. When guidance already available from the lecturer and university is supplemented with peer support it is likely to enhance a learner's overall educational experience. Therefore, recommendations for both lecturers and learners are included in this chapter as each has a role and a contribution to make to the building of the learning community. This chapter closes with a discussion of the limitations of this study.

The first conclusion which developed from the results in this study was that there were benefits for participants from experiencing peer support especially during the first six weeks of the semester. During this time participants were orientating themselves to the paper, adapting to using the newly introduced Moodle software and two learners were adjusting to the online environment for the first time. Participants' experiences reflected Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist learning theory. They reported advantages for their learning from their interactions with their peer support partner when they clarified their ideas and had access to another perspective about the content of their discussion.

Peer support differs from other support programmes such as mentoring because it is informal and there is no lecturer involvement apart from perhaps advertising the benefits of the approach (Kear, 2004; O'Neill et al., 2005; Simpson, 2002). There is typically no structure to a peer support partnership because support is provided in response to a specific need and the focus may change at different times throughout the paper. My findings confirm previous research that suggested certain characteristics that seem to be a feature of effective partnerships. These include voluntary involvement, a commitment to the partnership, effective communication with a partner, a willingness to solve problems together and taking full advantage of opportunities to provide and receive support, guidance and feedback.

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For some peer support partners having someone to ask questions of was valuable and enabled them to clarify their own thinking and to participate more actively in their online paper. Their questions were initially focussed on practical concerns such as logging on to the paper, locating course related information and understanding assignment requirements. Scott et al., (2009) found that asking questions and receiving answers from a peer was supportive. Five participants in this study reported that they were reluctant to ask their lecturer for clarification or information about the paper. Therefore, having a peer support partner may provide these learners with someone to ask for advice and guidance so they are not delayed from completing their learning task or assignment.

Some participants found that reciprocal support was a characteristic of their peer support partnership and there were different levels of this support provided. The more successful partners, Fiona and Daniel, reported that there was a balance to the support and guidance they provided one and other. It was more difficult for participants in the other two partnerships to receive reciprocal support because their communication was not maintained.

The social connection between learners also contributed to the building of each peer support partnership. Zachary (2000) noted that relationships “endure because there is a connection; a relationship has been forged, and common ground has been established” (p. 34). In this study for example, Emma reported that one reason her partnership was not successful was because more time was needed to develop their friendship. Their experience supported the literature as Brown (2001) and Zachary (2000) found that the process of building a social connection between learners takes time and consideration.

A further benefit from a peer support partnership was that learners often felt less isolated because they were motivated by their partner to participate in C.M.C. and this helped them feel that they belonged to their learning community. Fiona and Daniel used humour while Cassie and Emma motivated each other by email to participate in C.M.C. These participants acknowledged that support and encouragement was motivational and often persuaded them to contribute to the paper before deadlines.

In general, participants provided three types of support (academic, practical and emotional) which Carnwell (2000) and Sinclair (2003) used to categorise the different assistance that learners often require. In this study, academic support was associated with the course content

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and assignments while practical support included help with the software and general information about the paper. Emotional support was ongoing, often brief and usually sent via email or text. It was through the emotional support that partners learnt more about each other's background as they worked together to develop a social connection.

Secondly, partners' advice for establishing future peer support partnerships is an important consideration. Self-selection was the preferred method for finding a partner as this process encourages a serendipitous connection between learners. Zachary (2000) noted that "making the connection is a formidable task and requires time and tending" (p. 35). Further opportunities to make connections would encourage more learners to experience the benefits of peer support. This study indicated that matching learners may be haphazard and this process is unlikely to lead to an enduring partnership.

Finally, the contribution each learner makes to a peer support partnership includes achieving a balance between asking for and providing guidance for their partner. Regular contact and whenever possible prompt replies contribute to the building of a successful partnership (Zachary, 2000). Timely replies ensure that the learner in need does not lose their train of thought and there is opportunity for new expanded ideas as a result of the interaction with their partner. Communication skills such as the ability to listen, explain, question and summarise are enhanced and provide the basis for peer support interactions to flourish.

Further study is recommended before suggesting that a peer support partnership has the potential to contribute to the overall educational experience for both learners when they unreservedly provide reciprocal academic, practical and/or emotional support. Learners who establish a social connection with another learner and then select to build a peer support partnership often find that they are more motivated to participate in their online paper. The more often learners contribute to their paper the more likely they are to experience social presence and to consider that they belong to their learning community.

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## **Recommendations**

### *For Lecturers*

Revisiting the role of the lecturer in modelling positive interactions and facilitating social connections may be necessary as participants in this study showed a lack of interest in the social forum. When considering the design of a paper, the lecturer may well include an opportunity for learners to make informal social connections with others in the paper. When learners use information from profiles to make social connections, this knowledge about other learners, may help them with their contributions to C.M.C. (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). These suggestions were all included in the paper in question but they did not work for these participants. For those interested in using peer support, an online notice board and a class email advertising the benefits of such a partnership would be helpful. This approach would ensure that learners' experience in the paper begins positively and they would be aware of the advantages from using peer support.

Participants in this study were reluctant to ask their lecturer for advice. It would be helpful if lecturers encouraged contact from individual learners in the hope that they would begin to consider that their lecturer is also a member of their learning community. Building a relationship between the lecturer and learners early in the paper would enhance their interactions during C.M.C. and contribute to learners' overall educational experience. Peer support partners might also remind their partner to contact the lecturer by email or the learning community when there is a problem that they cannot solve between them. This approach would ensure that learners were not having to wait too long for their answer and would be able to continue with their learning.

A Frequently Asked Questions (F.A.Q.) forum specifically designed for each online paper may help learners locate particular information about the software and the paper. This forum would answer practical questions such as how to log on and would provide information such as the starting and finishing dates for each semester. Information summarising requirements for each assignment, their word count and the number of references required would also be helpful.

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*For Learners*

It is recommended that online learners explore the software and read the information about their paper as soon as possible and preferably before their paper commences. This will enable learners to understand the potential of the software and to use the optional mechanisms such as learner profiles, social forum and chat rooms. Participation in an online paper is important and learners must be encouraged to contribute to C.M.C. in order to reap the benefits for their own learning. Sometimes when a reply to a C.M.C. contribution is received learners are motivated because they understand that they are on track with their learning or they realise that they have misunderstood the material and they take the opportunity to review their input for this particular topic. Learners are also advised to continually reflect on their learning and provide in-depth replies linking their ideas with those from different learners and topics in C.M.C. For those learners lamenting the lack of face-to-face contact in an online paper then 'skype' and video conferences may provide the solution for this need to experience visual contact.

In a peer support partnership a balance between providing and asking for guidance is the underlying purpose. When partners follow this straightforward strategy they are more likely to experience a positive partnership and gain benefits for their learning. Prompt and regular communication between partners contributes to the building of a peer support partnership and for this to be successful all contact details (e.g. phone, mobile, skype address and email) must be provided to enhance this connection.

**Limitations of this research**

As there were only three case studies, the scale was limited and the results cannot be generalised to a larger population. Secondly, all the data was reported by participants and I was unable to observe them in their natural setting which was cyberspace. Although this was a study about the experiences of online learners, participants lived in the same city and were able to meet face-to-face if they so required. The experiences of online learners who live in distant locations are not included in this study. The timeframe in this study was limited to one 13-week semester and participants' ideas may change over a longer period. This was a compulsory paper for all participants and this may also have influenced their experiences and opinions.

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There were three lessons I learned in the process of undertaking this study. The introduction of the contact charts halfway through the study was not an effective strategy. Participants were reluctant to change to another written document as they had already started recording their experiences in their diaries. I now believe that asking partners to keep in regular contact (e.g. weekly) may have encouraged them to interact more often with their partner. I regret not reminding participants about keeping in contact and using some of the peer support strategies through my group emails.

### **Suggestions for further research**

It would be interesting to discover if peer support is beneficial for online learners who live in distant locations, are enrolled in other programmes or at another university. The opportunity to compare on-campus and online peer support experiences would also provide further information about the benefits of peer support for all learners. I did not consider the gender of peer support partners and it would be helpful to know if same or different gender partners experience similar benefits. The age of peer support partners was also not considered in this study so further research identifying this factor would be of interest. A study to find out if peer support would be successful with more than two learners is likely to provide different results. The use of peer support in other non-compulsory online papers, where students are not post-graduate, would also provide the basis for further research.

### **Final summary**

This study described six online learners' experiences and opinions about peer support. As an informal partnership, peer support has the potential to provide learners with academic, practical and emotional support while they are learning. For online learners, who feel isolated from their learning community, an opportunity to get to know and receive guidance from someone else in their paper, may prove to be motivational. In an ideal peer support partnership serendipitous rapport seems to be a starting point. Partners in this scenario would have an initial social connection, choose who to work with and they would build a relationship to meet their needs. The advantages from using peer support is that partners may receive encouragement, feedback and whenever possible, an answer to their questions. They may also choose to discuss the content of their paper and clarify their understanding of the

assignment requirements with a peer support partner. As the number of online learners increase in a paper it may be helpful for individual learners to have a peer support partner to communicate with during academic study. Emma's are the final words in this study when she described peer support in this way: "it helps knowing that someone is there and is maybe there for you."

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## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix A**

### **Information Sheet for Participants**

What are the benefits of peer support for online learners?

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate we thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind and we thank you for considering our request.

#### **What is the Aim of the Project?**

The aim of this project is to find out more about the benefits of peer support for learners enrolled in the same postgraduate online learning paper. This project is being undertaken for the researcher's MA thesis. The researcher's role in the project is to facilitate and gather data about peer support strategies for six learners enrolled in same postgraduate online learning paper. The researcher has worked previously with another learner enrolled in the same paper and found that the informal peer support and encouragement helped both learners to be actively involved in learning and to successfully pass the course.

In this project participants will be encouraged to communicate with each other regularly using email, phone and/or face-to-face meetings. Before the beginning of the paper participants will be introduced to a few peer support strategies at a briefing session. The peer support strategies will describe circumstances when one learner may like to demonstrate collaboration and encouragement for their peer, provide immediate feedback for on line postings, locate further course readings as well as provide reminders about timelines and course requirements.

#### **What type of participants are being sought?**

I am seeking at least six learners (three groups) who would like to work together to support and encourage each other in learning while enrolled in a postgraduate online learning paper. Volunteers from the postgraduate course will be recruited. Age, gender and ethnicity are not important issues for the selection of participants.

#### **What will participants be asked to do?**

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to keep in regular contact (at least once a week) with your 'buddy' over the course of one university semester using individually selected forms of communication such as email, phones and/or face-to-face meetings. Participants are invited to provide copies of any email contact with their peer for the researcher. After an initial briefing session participants will be asked to engage in two group interviews and one individual interview with the researcher during the course of one university semester. The time involved for each participant in this project will not exceed five hours. Please be aware that you may decide not to take part in the project without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

#### **Can participants change their mind and withdraw from the project?**

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind. In the case of a learner withdrawing from the project the researcher will invite another learner to join the project, use the remaining pair or invite another group to join the project at the beginning of semester two.

### **What data or information will be collected and what use will be made of it?**

Information will be collected from the participants regarding:

- how regularly participants contacted each other
- what methods of contact were used
- what aspects of the course and learning were discussed
- whether the contact provides motivation for the participants
- any questions or concerns that were solved
- what was helpful to each learner
- the extent receiving feedback and encouragement was useful for learning
- how the leadership role was shared
- whether participants believed there was an impact on work performance as a result of peer support
- whether any new skills or strategies developed
- suggestions for the other participants in the project

Interviews with the participants will be tape recorded and transcribed. The information will be analysed for common themes and included in the research report. All tape recordings, email documents and other data will be destroyed at the completion of the project. The transcript will be returned to participants to check to ensure that the information included is a true reflection of the participants' experiences.

This project involves an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. Consequently, although the university ethics committee is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used. In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and also that you may withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

The information is being collected to give the researcher an insight into the range of benefits and advantages provided by informal peer support. A transcriber will have access to the interview data and the results of the project will be published and be available in the library. Every attempt will be made to preserve anonymity by not including any information that may identify a participant. Participants will be asked to provide a pseudonym to protect their identity. You are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project should you wish. The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned above will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed. Reasonable precautions will be taken to protect and destroy data gathered by email. However, the security of electronically transmitted information cannot be guaranteed. Caution is advised in the electronic transmission of sensitive material.

**What if participants have any questions?** If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either the researcher or her supervisor.

## Appendix B

### Consent Form for Participants

How does peer support benefit online learners?

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

- 1 My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
- 2 I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage.
- 3 The data including audio-tapes and transcripts will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed.
- 4 This project involves an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops and that in the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I may decline to answer any particular question (s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind.
- 5 Participants will receive a \$20 book voucher as a token of my appreciation. During group interviews a snack will be provided.
- 6 The results of the project may be published and available in the library but every attempt will be made to preserve participants' anonymity.
- 7 I understand that reasonable precautions have been taken to protect data transmitted by email but that the security of the information cannot be guaranteed.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....  
(Signature of participant)

.....  
(Date)

**Appendix C**  
**Peer Support Strategies/Questions**

What communication methods did you use and what method did you prefer?

What timings did you use for contact-as needed or a set time?

What aspects of learning did you discuss?

Were there any course or technical issues discussed?

Did you provide reminders re timelines?

How did having a study buddy impact on your motivation?

What questions or concerns were solved between you?

What was helpful for you personally as a learner?

To what extent was receiving feedback useful for you as a learner?

Did you also provide feedback and encouragement for your partner?

What was the impact of peer support on your interactions and learning?

How was 'leadership' shared?

Was there an impact on work performance as a result of your study buddy's support?

Did you develop any new skills or strategies working with your study buddy?

Have you any further suggestions for future peer support partners?

## Appendix D

### Focus Group One Questions

Could we start by introducing ourselves and identify which papers we are studying this year. Describe how having a study buddy has been helpful for you as a learner so far this year.

#### *Introductory Brainstorm*

1. I would like to begin our focus group with a brainstorm around the term ‘peer support’ so, when you hear ‘peer support’ what comes to mind?
2. What can you tell me about your experiences having a study buddy?  
In what ways is it helpful meeting your buddy face-to-face initially? Later in the semester?  
Probe for: a range of ideas/opinions  
Listen for: descriptions about contact with each other, what prompted face-to-face meetings
3. What are the benefits of peer support?  
Was there a particular question or issue that your buddy was able to clarify for you?  
Would you tend to ask your buddy first if you have a question?  
What topics do you discuss? What new information did you share with your buddy?  
Did you provide encouragement, feedback?  
In what instances do you give or receive feedback?  
If neither of you knew the answer what would you do next?
4. What are the disadvantages of peer support?  
Many of you are studying more papers than this one-would it be helpful to have different buddies? Would a buddy be helpful if not enrolled in your paper?  
Is it better to select your own buddy?  
Two participants had their first buddy withdraw from study and this paper –would you like to tell us about that experience?  
Two participants joined us during the semester-how was that experience?
5. What advice about peer support would you give other learners beginning distance learning?
6. Finally- what should I have asked you that I didn’t think to ask?

If you remember anything else that you think I would be interested to hear please email me.

## Appendix E

### Focus Group Interview 2

Let's introduce ourselves for the tape and tell us one interesting thing you did during the break that was not to do with work or study.

1. I would like to start with a brainstorm - "study buddies."  
What comes to mind?  
What do you think?  
How would you describe study buddies?
2. What do you talk about with your buddy?  
Prompts-assignment requirements (word limits, due time), articles, glossary,  
University life, social, work
3. You have now completed two assignments for this paper –please explain at this time how your buddy supported you or vice versa?
4. What are your expectations of the study buddy relationship?  
Have your expectations changed over time?
5. I would like to find out about contact between study buddies.  
What is important about contact?  
Prompts  
Methods - email, text, f2f,  
Immediacy-is this important?  
Reminders  
Usefulness
6. Please explain the nature of your study buddy relationship-is only academic or is it also social?
7. Thinking about your experiences of distance papers you are doing or have done, does having a study buddy make a difference to your learning?  
How?  
Does having a study buddy make you feel part of the class more so than in those where you don't have a study buddy?  
Tell me why or why not it is important to feel part of a class
8. Thinking about your experiences of on-campus papers what is your opinion about having a study buddy? Is it more important for distance learners or would both benefit from the relationship?
9. How successful was your overall educational experience working with a study Buddy?  
What aspect/s contributed to your success? What was problematic?
10. Would you recommend the use of a study buddy?  
If so how would you go about it?  
How would you describe study buddy?  
What does each buddy need to do in order for study buddy to work?

11. Please describe the attributes of a study buddy?  
How do they act? What support do they provide?  
How does a buddy get the balance just right/
12. I have been thinking about changing the name of my research project.  
Which of these terms best describes what you feel having a study buddy is about?  
  
learner to learner mentoring  
peer coaching  
peer collaboration  
peer support  
learner to learner interaction  
learner learners
13. Finally- have you any other experiences or comments that you think are relevant that have not been covered?
14. If you remember anything else that you think I would be interested to hear please email me.

Thank you very much for coming along this afternoon. I enjoyed the discussion and have learned a lot from your comments and suggestions. I also want to restate that what you have shared with me is confidential. No part of our discussion that includes names or other identifying information will be used in any report coming from this research.

I really appreciate your contributions to this interview. I will contact each of you for a suitable time over the next couple of weeks to meet for your individual interview. This will be your final involvement in my project. Many thanks.

## **Appendix F**

### **Protocol Chart**

Welcome and thank you for taking the time to participate in this discussion about peer support. I am seeking to learn more about your experiences and opinions about peer support. The purpose of this study is to find out what you think. I would like you to share your honest feelings about any issues we discuss, positive or negative.

I would like to review some ground rules for discussion:

- There are no right and wrong answers, so please tell me your thoughts, whether they are positive or negative.
- It is okay to disagree with one another. I want to hear everyone's point of view. If you disagree, please do so respectfully.
- Only one person should talk at a time. I am tape recording this session so that I do not miss anything important. If two people talk at once, it makes it very difficult to transcribe the tape. I may remind you of this during the meeting.
- I would like everyone to participate. You do not have to answer every question but, your contribution is really important and as valid as everyone else here.
- I will be using first names only today. Everything you say is confidential. Your name will not appear anywhere in my report. What you say today will not be attached to your name at any point.
- I really want to learn from you and find out what you think about peer support. Please tell me your honest opinions.
- I want to make a couple more points related to the tape recording. Please speak up. If you speak too quietly, it will be too difficult to hear you later on the tape.

This group meeting will last around an hour.

## Appendix G

### Beth's Individual Interview

How has your academic work been progressing this semester? Did you enjoy your holiday?

1. I would like to start with a brainstorm - "study buddies."  
What comes to mind? What do you think? How would you describe study buddies?
2. What do you talk about with your buddy?  
Prompts-assignment requirements (word limits, due time), articles, glossary, University life, social, work?  
You said that emails were good because they were short-please explain
3. You have now completed two assignments for this paper –please explain at this time how your buddy supported you or vice versa? You said you liked the reassurance-please explain?
4. What are your expectations of the study buddy relationship?  
Have your expectations changed over time?
5. I would like to find out about contact between study buddies.  
What is important about contact? Prompts-methods-email, text, f2f, Immediacy-is this important-reminders, Usefulness?
6. Please explain the nature of your study buddy relationship-is only academic or is it also social? Emotional? Please give examples?
7. Thinking about your experiences of distance papers you are doing or have done, does having a study buddy make a difference to your learning? How? Does having a study buddy make you feel part of the class more so than in those where you don't have a study buddy? Tell me why or why not it is important to feel part of a class?
8. Thinking about your experiences of on-campus papers what is your opinion about having a study buddy? Is it more important for distance learners or would both campus and distance benefit from the relationship?
9. How successful was your overall educational experience working with a study Buddy?  
What aspect/s contributed to your success? What was problematic? You said that you feel all alone-describe this further?
10. Would you recommend the use of a study buddy? What would you do first? How would you describe the process?
11. What do you need to do in an on-going way in order for study buddy to succeed?
12. If so how would you go about it? How would you describe study buddy? What does each buddy need to do in order for study buddy to work? You said that you need to put the effort in –and it takes more effort-in what way?
13. Please describe the attributes of a study buddy? How do they act? What support do they provide? How does a buddy get the balance just right?
14. You said it was important to have the same styles and that having someone on the same wave length-explain please.
15. Confidence (very, confident, not) at the beginning of the paper and now?  
Distance learning? Discussion online? Moodle? Email? Social Forum? Lecturer for advice?
16. How many times would you go online for this paper in a week? How times do you respond to someone else in a week?

## Appendix H

### Questionnaire

1. I enjoyed the online course  
*Strongly disagree*   *Somewhat disagree*   *Disagree*   *No Opinion*   *Agree*   *Somewhat agree*   *Strongly agree*
2. Even though we were not physically together in a traditional classroom, I still felt like I was part of a group in the online course  
*Strongly disagree*   *Somewhat disagree*   *Disagree*   *No Opinion*   *Agree*   *Somewhat agree*   *Strongly agree*
3. An online course provides a personal experience similar to the classroom  
*Strongly disagree*   *Somewhat disagree*   *Disagree*   *No Opinion*   *Agree*   *Somewhat agree*   *Strongly agree*
4. An online course allows for social interaction  
*Strongly disagree*   *Somewhat disagree*   *Disagree*   *No Opinion*   *Agree*   *Somewhat agree*   *Strongly agree*
5. An online course is an efficient means of communicating with others  
*Strongly disagree*   *Somewhat disagree*   *Disagree*   *No Opinion*   *Agree*   *Somewhat agree*   *Strongly agree*
6. I found that having a study buddy was helpful for my online learning  
*Strongly disagree*   *Somewhat disagree*   *Disagree*   *No Opinion*   *Agree*   *Somewhat agree*   *Strongly agree*
7. My study buddy provides encouragement for me in online study  
*Strongly disagree*   *Somewhat disagree*   *Disagree*   *No Opinion*   *Agree*   *Somewhat agree*   *Strongly agree*
8. I was able to provide encouragement for my study buddy  
*Strongly disagree*   *Somewhat disagree*   *Disagree*   *No Opinion*   *Agree*   *Somewhat agree*   *Strongly agree*
9. My study buddy answered my questions promptly  
*Strongly disagree*   *Somewhat disagree*   *Disagree*   *No Opinion*   *Agree*   *Somewhat agree*   *Strongly agree*
10. I answered my study buddy's questions promptly  
*Strongly disagree*   *Somewhat disagree*   *Disagree*   *No Opinion*   *Agree*   *Somewhat agree*   *Strongly agree*

Adapted from the Inventory of Presence Questionnaire developed by Presence Research Working Group at Technische Universiteit Eindhoven Netherlands and a questionnaire by Chih-Hsiung Tu. Picciano, A. (2002). Beyond Student Perceptions: Issues of Interaction, Presence and Performance in an Online Course. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*. 6(1), 21-40.

## Appendix I Contact Chart

Date:.....

Type of contact this week	How many times?	Who initiated contact?	Comments Box –the topic discussed with your buddy and if there was a solution please describe it. <i>e.g. discussed interview assignment criteria-buddy suggested another article-a great help for me</i>
Email			
Phone			
Face-to-face			
Other			

Overall, how useful was contact this week? (please circle one)

4            3            2            1

Extremely useful    reasonably useful    useful    limited use

Please tell me about one contact with your buddy, the method of contact, what was discussed, the outcome and any benefits from the contact:

  
  
  
  

How useful was this contact? (Please circle one)

4            3            2            1

Extremely useful    reasonably useful    useful    limited use

Thank you for telling me about your contact this week