

## CHAPTER 6: PRESENTING THE MODEL

### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I will summarize my model for constructing educational criticism of online courses. The rationale for the model has been articulated throughout the previous five chapters. This model consists of a conceptual structure, procedural guidelines, and a list of required elements to include in the criticism. I will discuss each of these components in turn.

### *Conceptual Structure*

Online courses are complex, human-driven contexts for formal learning. Theories that focus on instructional settings and methods that are designed to accommodate inquiry into complex phenomena are essential to the systematic study of online courses. Such a line of research is necessary as the basis for a common language with which we can begin to speak holistically about online courses. I will summarize the conceptual structure supporting my model for constructing educational criticism of online courses by focusing on the structural relationships among the following five conceptual areas: online courses, instructional theory, qualitative research case studies, educational criticism, and online course typologies. (See Figure 2.) Readers are directed to specific chapters where additional details on each area are provided.

These conceptual areas are also presented in a series of concept maps (Novak and Gowin, 1984 and Novak, 1998). Novak-type concept maps (as opposed to alternate forms) are progressively differentiated with broader, more inclusive concepts at the top and supporting concepts and examples appearing toward the bottom. Concepts are

contained in ovals. Linking phrases identify relationships between concepts. Propositions are formed by reading a beginning concept, reading the linking phrase, and then reading the ending concept. The concept maps should be read from top to bottom (except where the direction of arrows indicates otherwise).

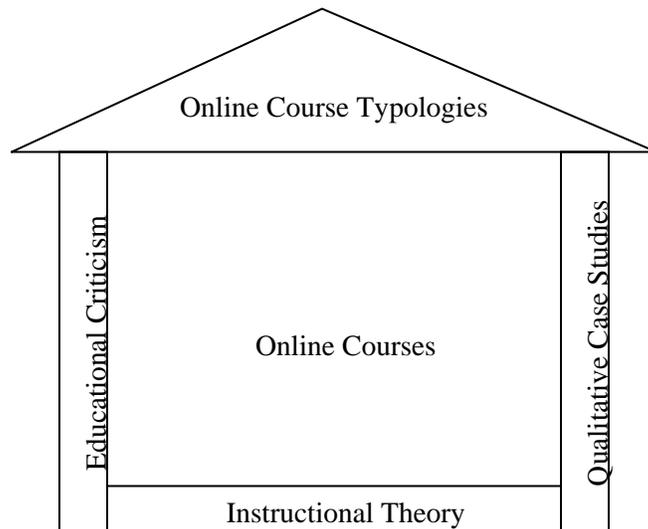


Figure 2. Online Course Criticism Model

*Online courses.*

The phrase “online course” refers to formal contexts for learning offered by a variety of organizations such as higher educational institutions, K-12 schools, corporate training departments, military, government, and professional associations. The purposes underlying each organization’s implementation of online courses are diverse as are the subject matter and the configuration of elements in the courses. (See Figure 3.) Some online courses are experienced by individual learners who interact, by themselves, with instructional materials (i.e., varied types of media including text, graphics, animations, simulations, assessments, etc.) at times of their own choosing. Other online courses are led by instructors and include interactions between multiple learners, one or more

instructors, and instructional materials. Such configurations are typical of those offered in higher education and may also require completion within an academic term. Learners may have the option of completing their course work asynchronously (at differing times of their own choosing) or synchronously (all learners at the same time). This model for educational criticism is intended for use with online courses offered in higher education settings, but it may be applicable in other settings as well. (Online courses and their study are discussed in greater detail in Chapters 1, 2, and 3.)

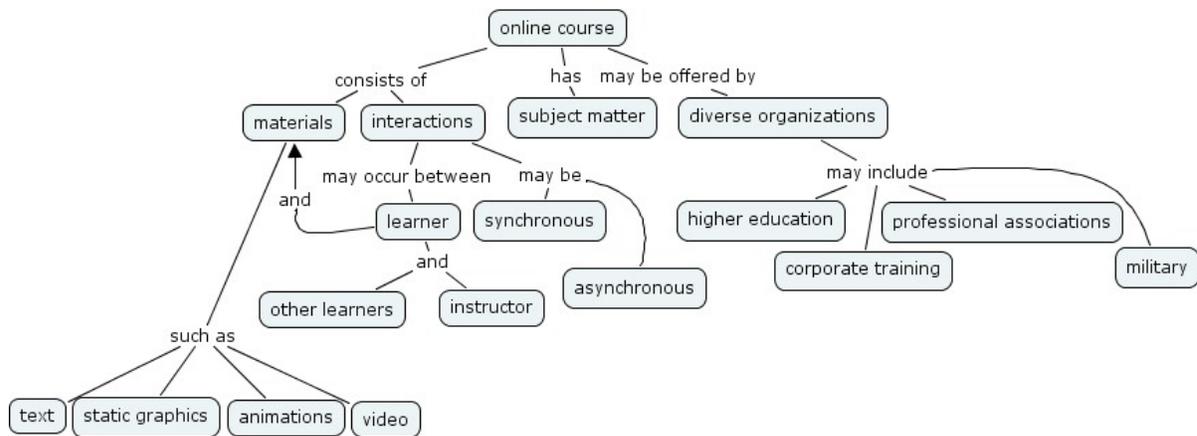


Figure 3. Concepts Underlying Online Courses

*Instructional theory.*

I am using the phrase “instructional theory” here to refer to various bodies of work related to formal learning contexts. That is, learning may take place for an individual, casually, at any time or place, but this is an informal process. (See Figure 4.) Formal settings for learning occur when an individual submits him or herself to the intentionality of another person (i.e., an instructor or curriculum developer) for the purpose of learning. This is instruction. Although learners have unique characteristics (including prior experiences, aptitudes, motivation, etc.) that may affect their learning, the focus of this model is on the learning environment external to the learner. This

environment is the place where learners, instructor(s), and instructional materials intersect. In face-to-face courses this is the classroom. In online courses the virtual environment is distributed across multiple venues (discussed below) and includes the instructional experience arising from the interactions each learner has with other learners, instructor(s), and materials. There is an instructional experience that is unique to each individual, but there is also an aggregate instructional experience arising from all the interactions of all the individuals in the course. Although online courses exist at moments in time, the instructional experience and the broader learning environment produce artifacts that can be studied.

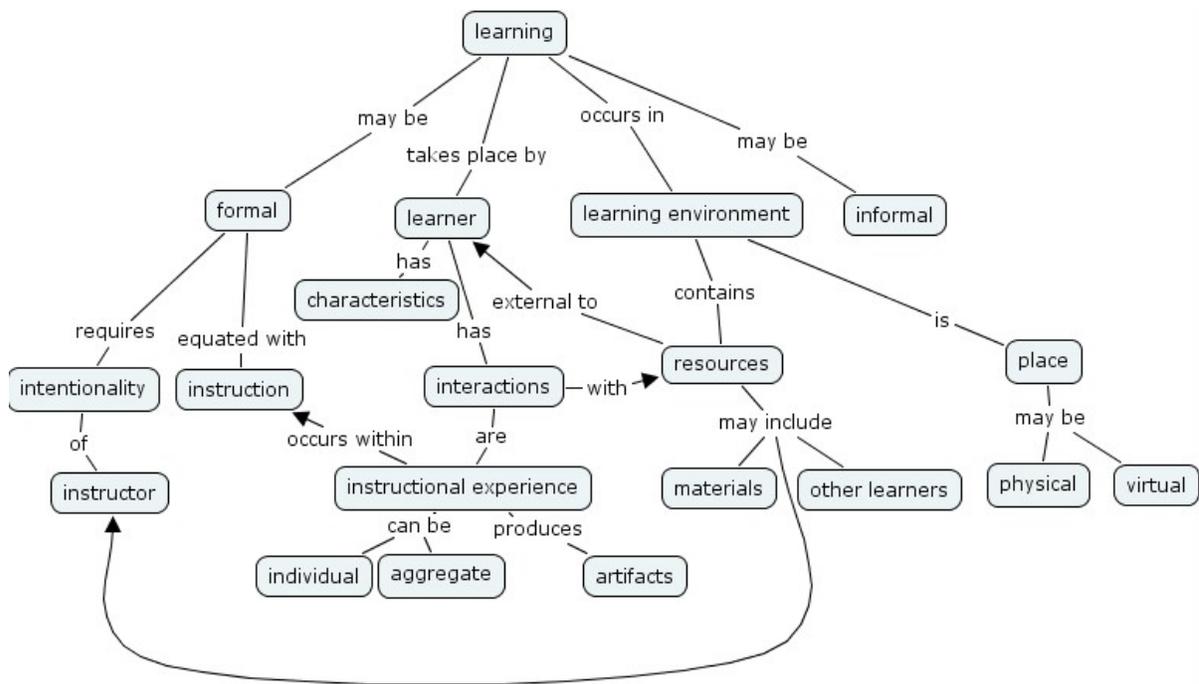


Figure 4. Concepts Underlying Learning

Schwab’s (1973) depiction of the educational commonplaces is the most holistic construct to encompass these dimensions of instructional theory and is central to this model. Figure 5 shows the relationships between the four commonplaces (e.g., learners, instructor(s), subject matter, and milieu) and some of the other concepts discussed

above. In particular, Schwab’s milieus refer to the various contextual dimensions in which formal learning occurs. These milieus include the immediate learning environment as well as the broader institutional and societal contexts. (Instructional theory is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1. In addition, Chapters 3 and 5 incorporate Schwab’s commonplaces.)

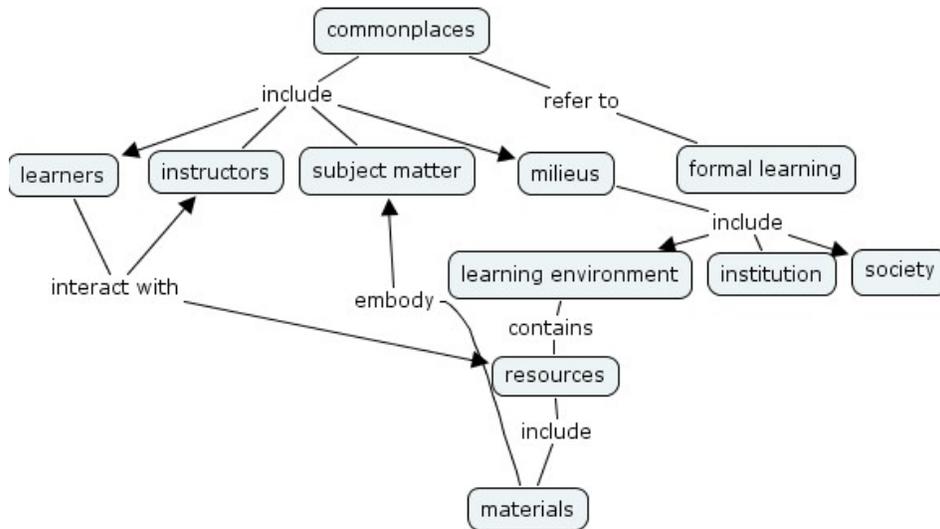


Figure 5. Concepts Underlying Schwab’s (1973) Commonplaces

*Qualitative research case studies.*

Qualitative research case studies refer both to a process of inquiry and to the product that documents this inquiry in the form of a richly descriptive report. (See Figure 6.) Due to the complexity of the cases studied in this research genre, it is important to consider the boundaries (i.e., specific time and place) of the phenomenon (e.g., an online course) and to collect multiple types of data from the naturalistic setting in order to form a holistic picture. Since the researcher is the principal instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative case studies, particular care is taken to consider how underlying assumptions and values (i.e., tacit theories) and more explicit issues and constructs (i.e., formative theories) affect his or her interpretations. The interpretive process involves

looking for themes in the multiple types of data that emerge from the study (i.e., internal interpretation) and examining the case (e.g., the online course) through various interpretive perspectives (i.e., external interpretation). Rigorous validity procedures are followed and documented in order to demonstrate credibility to outside readers and to those involved in the study (e.g., instructors, students, and administrators involved with an online course). There are specific procedures associated with certain paradigmatic perspectives. Postpositivists tend to adopt rather systematic procedures reminiscent of quantitative methods. Constructivists emphasize the constructed nature of reality and favor procedures that embrace varied, organic perspectives compared to the postpositivists. Criticalists employ procedures that call into question forces that preserve existing power structures (such as those related to gender, ethnicity, income, etc.). There are at least nine procedures available to researchers, three from each world view: triangulation, member checking, audit trail, disconfirming evidence, prolonged engagement in the field, thick description, researcher reflexivity, collaboration, and peer debriefing. In this model, researchers are expected to employ at least three validity procedures in their online course criticisms. (Case studies are introduced in Chapter 2 and discussed in detail in Chapter 4.)

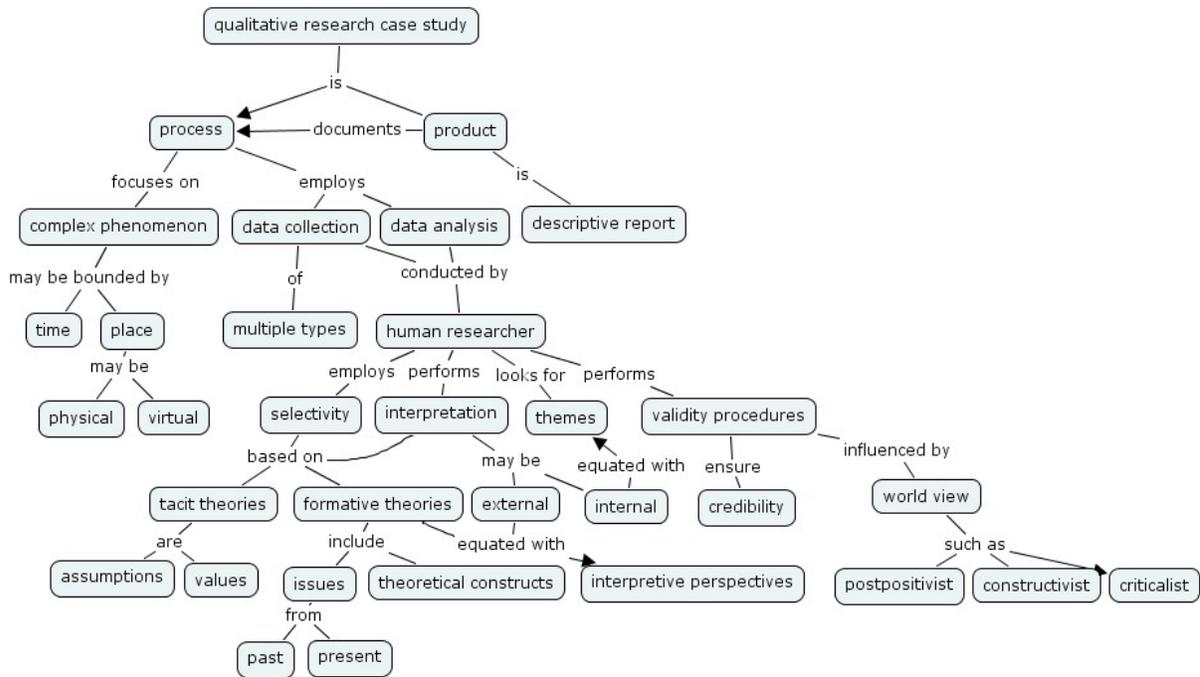


Figure 6. Concepts Underlying Qualitative Research Case Studies

*Educational criticism.*

Educational criticisms in the Eisnerian (1985, 1991) tradition are a sub-genre of qualitative research case studies. The case study researcher takes on the role of a critic, but her or his role of critic is based in connoisseurship. (See Figure 7.) In my model for educational criticism of online courses, this connoisseurship is distinguished by access to the online course, a honed perceptiveness regarding online course components, and the ability to recognize when certain aspects of the course are instances of a general phenomenon (based on antecedent knowledge of the institutional context and trends beyond the institution). As with case studies, educational criticisms refer both to a research process and a product. With online courses, in particular, it is important for the critic to indicate the bounds of the online course both in terms of time period and of the various components of the learning environment. (These may include the course

management system, web applications, external web sites, and other resources that are considered to be “part of the course.”)

The criticism product includes description, interpretation, evaluation, and themes. Also included is documentation of the research process (outlined above). The rich description of the online course setting is written in an evocative style and includes excerpts from the learning environment. The criticism also includes a view of the online course setting through four interpretive perspectives: the Spectrum of Teaching Styles (Mosston and Ashworth, 1990), the Community of Inquiry Model (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000), five facets of a learning environment (Perkins, 1991), and modular reusability. These four interpretive perspectives are each associated with one or more of Schwab’s (1973) commonplaces (i.e., the Spectrum of Teaching Styles relates to instructors and learners, as does the Community of Inquiry Model, while the learning environment facets and modular reusability each relate primarily to the milieu or learning environment of the online course). The interpretive views of the online course setting allow the critic to include comments about the educational value of aspects of the online course while a summary of the themes arising from the data analysis allows readers to generalize to other settings beyond the immediate course. (Educational criticism/connoisseurship is introduced in Chapter 2. Goals for educational criticisms of online courses are articulated in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 addresses methodological issues in creating educational criticisms, and Chapter 5 provides a detailed view of the role of interpretive perspectives in educational criticisms of online courses.)

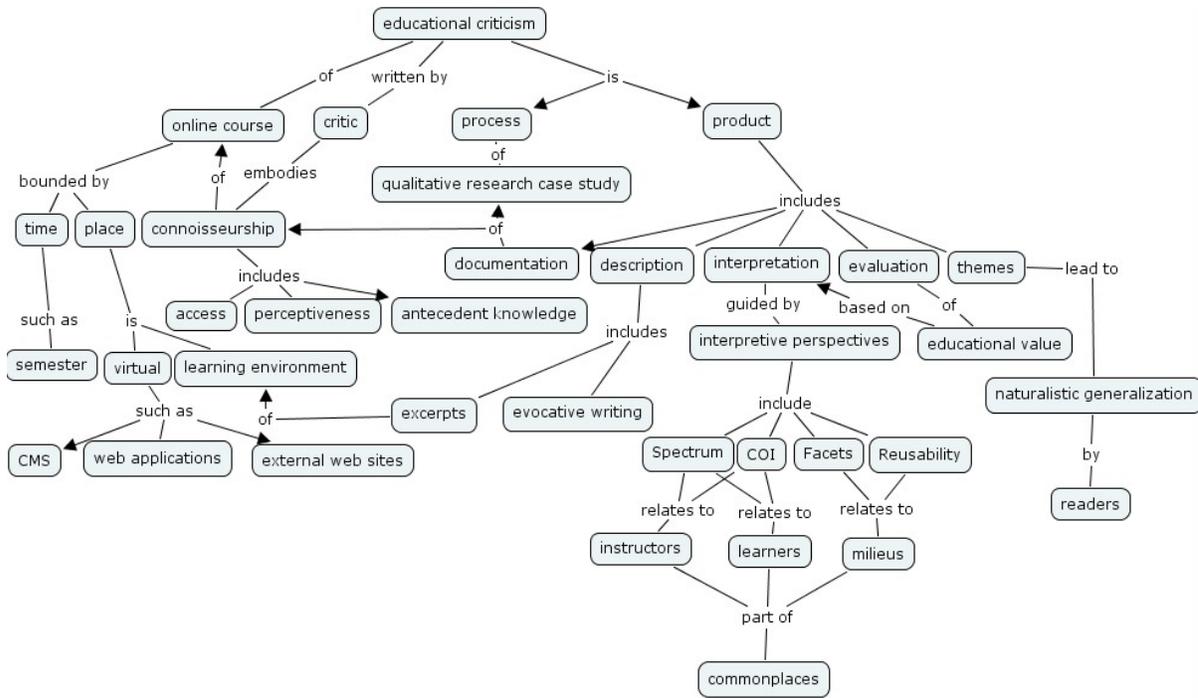


Figure 7. Concepts Underlying Educational Criticism

*Online course typologies.*

As a large number of online course criticisms reflecting various disciplines and teaching styles from diverse institutional contexts are published by a variety of critics using the standard approach in this model, meta-patterns will emerge. (See Figure 8.) These meta-patterns can be combined to form one or more online course typologies (or pattern languages) that describe the complexity of online course types and that can be used to guide the design of online courses in the future. This is the long term goal of the implementation of this model for online course criticism. (Online course typologies are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.)

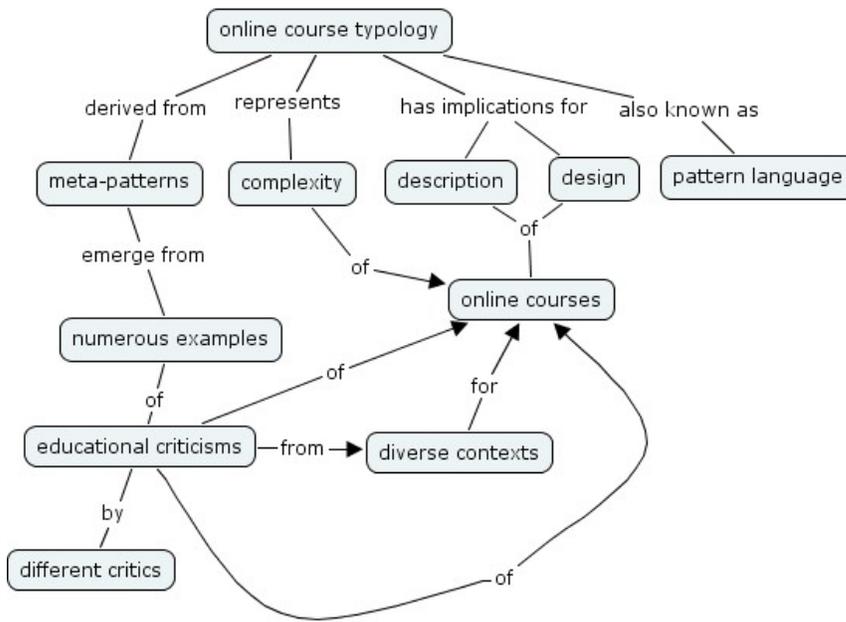


Figure 8. Concepts Underlying Online Course Typologies

### *Procedural Guidelines*

While the unique features of each online course and of individual critics will determine the specific procedures followed in educational criticisms, this model does provide some general guidelines for the process of educational criticism of online courses. The process is essentially that of the qualitative research case study as described above. The procedural guidelines for this model are summarized in Table 3. I will comment briefly on each of these guidelines below. Readers are referred to other sections of this dissertation for additional details.

TABLE 3. Procedural Guidelines for Criticizing Online Courses

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1. Select online course for study
  2. Negotiate access to the online course
  3. Determine bounds of the online course
  4. Choose methods
  5. Obtain IRB approval
  6. Acquire archive of online course
  7. Conduct study
  8. Write criticism
  9. Ask instructor to respond in writing to the criticism
  10. Publish criticism
- 

*Select online course for study.*

There must be some basis for choosing to study one online course as opposed to another. The most likely reason is that a particular online course is an exemplar of some sort. Perhaps it is the first online course offered in a degree program, or it might be considered typical of a particular discipline's approach to online learning. The course or its instructor might have been recognized with an award. It is also possible that a particular term's offering of a course is of interest due to some time-specific occurrence (e.g., the involvement in the course of a noted guest facilitator or a hurricane interfering with the institution's operations). An online course should not be selected because it is considered to be of poor quality, however. Criticisms should not become the bases for witch hunts. (See Chapters 3 and 4 for more detail on selecting an online course to study.)

*Negotiate access to the online course.*

Permission to study the online course must be obtained from the “owner” of the course. This obviously includes the faculty member who created the online course, but, depending on institutional policies, it may also involve permission from others in the institution. (This is particularly true if the faculty member who designed the course is no longer available and if ownership of the course has ceded to the institution.) These stakeholders should be informed as to the intent of the critic in conducting the study. As elaborated in the next few sections, the critic should also negotiate how far her/his access extends into the online course, its materials, its students, and its instructor. It is possible that, due to the nature of their jobs, certain practitioners may have access to online courses of which they are not the instructor. Permission and access should still be sought from the appropriate persons. Also, it is assumed that the critic *isn't* the instructor of the course. Credibility issues surface quickly in this case. (How many directors get to publish reviews of their own movie while maintaining credibility?) This is slightly less of an issue if the critic is a practitioner (e.g., administrator or instructional designer) affiliated more loosely with the course than the instructor. (See Chapters 3 and 4 for more on accessing online courses.)

*Determine bounds of the online course.*

It is necessary to determine the bounds of the online course as it will be depicted in the criticism. The boundary is of time and of virtual “place.” For instance, which term’s course offering will be studied? Are artifacts from this entire time period available? Will the scope of these materials extend only to those contained in the course management system (CMS), or will other materials be included also (e.g., web sites maintained by the

instructor, external web sites linked from course materials, other web applications, etc.)?

This model assumes that the online course is represented only in archived materials and will likely be studied after the completion of the course. It is possible, however, that a critic might choose to study the course as a participant-observer as the course proceeds and include interviews with or surveys of students or others as well. (See Chapter 4 for more on establishing boundaries for study of the online course.)

*Choose methods.*

Validity procedures and methods for data collection and analysis should be selected as soon as feasible, since the methods chosen by a researcher may affect even the early stages of the study. For instance, the selected methods have implications for the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) approval of the study. As another example, if an audit trail is to be employed as a validity procedure, the researcher must have a plan in place for documenting each step of the transformation from online course materials to the various forms of qualitative data that will result. (Nine validity procedures are detailed in Chapter 4 as are methods for data collection. Data analysis is discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.)

*Obtain IRB approval.*

After getting permission from the owner(s) of the course, setting the scope of the study, and choosing validity procedures, studies of university online courses must be submitted to the institution's IRB to ensure that the humans involved in the online course are not harmed in any way by the study. If the study is of archived materials and if student information is kept anonymous (including any screen captures of discussion

postings or email messages), it is not likely that students will be harmed by the study. However, all university studies should be reviewed by the IRB for approval.

*Acquire archive of online course.*

It is preferable to obtain a set of archived course materials (as bounded above) as a “snapshot” in time. To depend upon the actual online course materials as the basis of the study risks degradation of the course. That is, a new term may start, and the instructor may start making modifications to the materials before they can be studied. External web sites are of particular concern as they might be modified or deleted at any time without regard for others who link to them. The snapshot of the course materials may be in the form of downloaded web pages, a CMS archive, screenshots, printouts, or a combination of one or more of these. Some formats are easier than others to incorporate as excerpts into the actual criticism. For instance, if the only representation of an important web page is a printout, this might be difficult to incorporate visually into the narrative of the online course criticism. (See Chapter 4 for more on archived online course materials.)

*Conduct study.*

The actual study of the online course forms the basis for the criticism that follows. This involves implementing the methods for data collection, data analysis and validity chosen earlier. The interpretive process, involving the interplay of the researcher’s assumptions and the four interpretive perspectives with the collected data, proceeds at this point also. The researcher looks for themes here that will be incorporated into the criticism (along with potential excerpts supporting these themes). The specific choices of methods and implementation are left to individual researchers.

(Methodology is discussed in great detail in Chapters 4 and 5, and the interpretive perspectives are additionally discussed in Chapter 3.)

*Write criticism.*

Educational criticisms of online courses should convey the essence of the online course to the reader. Emphasis should be placed on evocative writing in the critic's personal style. The specific elements called for in this model are listed in the next section of this chapter, but the format of the criticism is determined by the critic. (Educational criticisms are discussed in great detail in Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5.)

*Ask instructor to respond in writing to the criticism.*

After the online course criticism has been written, it should be presented to the course's instructor for review and comment. The instructor's written comments should be included in the final version of the criticism. This serves several functions. First, it allows the critic's inference of the instructor's intentions in the course to be confirmed or denied by the instructor. Second, the involvement of the instructor in the final version of the criticism helps ensure that the focus of the criticism is essentially positive (despite any individual evaluative statements contained in the criticism.) Third, by doing so the credibility of the study is enhanced. (The purpose of the instructor's response to the criticism is discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.)

*Publish criticism.*

To be effective, educational criticisms of online courses must be distributed through publication venues. Given the emphasis in this model on methodological and theoretical rigor, it is preferable that criticisms following this model be published in scholarly journals devoted to instruction, instructional technology, online learning and

related topics. The publication of practitioner-created criticisms in such venues (rather than in targeting subject matter-specific journals) helps centralize the body of knowledge derived from online course criticisms and prevents the formation of a rift between online course practitioners and instructional technology scholars.

I contacted the editors of over 40 journals such as the ones described above and asked if they were open to submissions of educational criticisms of online courses written in compliance with this model. (See Appendix for a listing of journals contacted and for the message sent to the editors.) Over 25% of the editors responded. Most of these indicated that if an online course criticism met submission requirements for their journal, they would be willing to accept it. That is, there was no *prima facie* rejection of educational criticisms of online courses among these editors. However, in several instances, an initial response from the editor indicated that such a manuscript would not be acceptable. In these cases, the editor had a preconception of what was meant by “educational criticism of online courses” that I was able to clarify to the extent that each editor changed his or her mind. In one case, an editor stated that since his journal was not read by practitioners, practitioner-written online course criticisms would not be accepted. Additionally, one journal editor refused to comment on her journal’s receptivity due to the journal’s policy of only accepting submissions referred by reviewers. She suggested that interested authors should refer to the journal’s submission guidelines. (In fact, almost every replying editor made at least passing reference to their journal’s submission guidelines.) My point in sharing this anecdote is to indicate something of the current receptivity among journal editors to online course criticisms. Critics following this model

will undoubtedly want to clarify the nature of such criticisms when submitting for publication.

### *Required Elements in Criticisms of Online Courses*

While I am sensitive to Eisner's (1985, 1991) wishes not to constrain educational critics to any particular required writing format, I include a list of required items in this model (See Table 4.) for two reasons. First, as a practitioner myself, I find that practitioners (at least those who do not regularly conduct research as a part of their jobs) want guidance in procedures to follow in studies and in elements to include in reports. Such elements facilitate the ability to get started in criticizing online courses, but they do not impose any restrictions on the writing style or the specific structural format of the criticism. I find an analogous intent and spirit in Glesne's (1999) striking description of a qualitative research proposal as "a recipe for improvisational cooks" (p. 17). Second, a central purpose behind offering this model for constructing educational criticism of online courses is to provide a modicum of standardization such that one criticism might be linked to another (however different the criticisms might be) in order to facilitate the eventual emergence of meta-patterns. The following list of criticism elements is offered for both of these reasons.

Now, a word about what this list is *not*. This list is not a prescriptive outline for all criticisms of online courses. Certainly, one option would be to use each of these elements in the order they are presented as headings or unlabelled sections of the criticism, but that need not be the case. These elements can be included in any way and in any order that the critic wishes to include them. Each element is explained below. Where additional detail would be helpful, I refer the reader to the appropriate earlier chapter.

TABLE 4. Online Course Criticism Checklist

- 
- Documentation of case study process
  - Eisner's elements:
    - Description
    - Interpretation
    - Evaluation
    - Thematics
  - Documentation of connoisseurship
  - Written response to criticism by the online course instructor
- 

*Documentation of case study process.*

In pursuit of the clarity of methodological rigor discussed at length in Chapter 5, it is important that the case study process (as outlined above) be documented in the online course criticism. In brief, this documentation should accomplish the following goals. It is possible that all of these can be addressed in only a few comprehensive sentences.

Documentation of the case study process should answer the question, “Why *this* course?” It should also describe the larger context (i.e., program, discipline, university) of which the online course is a part, including anything that distinguishes online courses from this context. The critic should mention how he or she got access to the course (including acknowledgement of any past relationship with the course. The time and (virtual) place boundaries of the online course should be established. Data sources, collection protocols, and analysis methods should be identified, as should the three validity procedures followed in the study. Finally, there should be some statement of the

length of time that the critic studied the archived course materials as a further indication of thoroughness.

*Eisner's elements.*

Elliot Eisner's (1985, 1991) four criticism elements (i.e., description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics) have been discussed in Chapter 2 (and at length in Eisner's writing). I will comment on each element briefly here as it pertains to educational criticism of online courses. Description of the online course should be evocative in effect and should incorporate excerpts (e.g., screen shots, discussions, materials, tables summarizing numerical data, timelines, etc.) for structural corroboration of the critic's conclusions. Interpretation in the criticism should reflect a view of the online course through each of the four interpretive perspectives, but it may also involve bringing critics' unique assumptions and values to bear on the courses they study. Although online course criticisms should not set out to disparage online courses or their instructors, the critic should include a statement about the educational value of elements in the online course. Since the emphasis in this model is on studying exemplars, it is expected that there will be much in the way of value found, but areas for improvement should also be noted. The development of themes is a part of the interpretive process, but themes (i.e., "thematics") are also shared in the criticism as the basis for naturalistic generalization by readers. (In addition to the overview of these elements in Chapter 2, see Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of interpretive perspectives and the interpretive process.)

*Documentation of connoisseurship.*

As discussed at length in Chapter 2, it is important to provide some indication of a critic's connoisseurship of online courses in the body of the criticism. It is important to balance thoroughness with brevity to achieve credibility while not detracting from the actual criticism.

*Written response to criticism by the online course instructor.*

This response was discussed in the procedural guidelines section above. Additionally, the statement from the course's instructor should, preferably, be incorporated in its entirety in the criticism. Space limitations may require using excerpts of the instructor's statement instead. However, care should be taken not to mischaracterize the instructor's message. (As noted above, more on this instructor statement can be found in Chapters 3 and 4.)

*Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have presented the conceptual structure, procedural guidelines, and criticism checklist that form my model for constructing educational criticism of online courses. Details associated with each of these elements can be found in the preceding chapters of this dissertation as noted above.

In the next chapter, I will apply this model to the study of one UCF online course. This criticism is offered as a non-perfect application of my model for constructing educational criticisms of online courses. It is not expected that other practitioner/critics will emulate my writing style or structural outline. They should apply the model according to their own styles and the nature of the online courses that they are studying. I agree with Eisner (1985) that "educational critics exploit their own sensibilities and their

own unique perceptions. They invoke their own voices to give life to their writing. Each educational criticism has its own signature” (p. 340). I look forward to what others will create. However, I recognize the helpfulness of having an example when one seeks to internalize a construct such as this model. This example criticism should be read as one self-contained piece. Although I have elsewhere in this dissertation documented my connoisseurship and discussed at some length the online course context at UCF, these elements are touched upon in the criticism example as well.