Online learning has grown dramatically in the past decade. Allen and Seaman (2015) estimated that over 20% of all post-secondary students took at least one online course in 2013, the large majority of which were provided asynchronously. Asynchronous courses are popular with students because of their flexibility, which is especially important in graduate-level programs where students often work full-time. As a result, it is perhaps not surprising that in the Fall of 2012 nearly 30% of all graduate students enrolled in at least one online course and 22% of students enrolled exclusively in online graduate programs (Ginder & Stearns, 2014).

While the need for flexibility is especially high for working graduate students, so is the need to develop close mentoring relationships with their instructors. Johnson (2008) explained that there are two interrelated aspects of teaching and mentoring—the academic and the human. Moore (1993) acknowledged the human aspect of teaching when he stated that instructors needed to offer their students “counsel, support, and encouragement” (p. 21). However, the human aspect of teaching can be particularly challenging in online courses where students and instructors are separated in space and time (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Asynchronous online courses rely predominantly on text feedback and text communication within a learning management system (Parsad & Lewis, 2009). Although instructors and students can effectively communicate via text (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000), text lacks visual and verbal communication cues making it more prone to misunderstandings (Draft & Lengel, 1986). This can leave students feeling isolated (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Asynchronous communication also tends to be more formal and content-focused compared to face-to-face communication that allows for rapid spontaneous exchanges (Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2008). Graham (2006) summarized that many students are drawn to online courses for its convenience but do not want to completely “sacrifice the social interaction and human touch they are used to in a face-to-face classroom” (p. 9).

Some instructors add this human touch to their graduate courses by meeting predominantly online but requiring students to attend occasional face-to-face classes (Cucciare, Weingardt, & Villafranca, 2008; Graham, 2006). This blended learning, or hybrid, model can effectively foster a sense of community because students have the opportunity to speak with their instructor synchronously (Rovai & Jordan, 2004), but removes some of the flexibility that students require, which can limit a course’s geographical reach (Graham, 2006). Furthermore, meeting as a whole group can make it difficult for instructors to have meaningful communication with individual students, even in relatively small courses. In fact, a research study with 3,135 student survey participants from 146 higher education institutions found that 71% of respondents would have liked to receive verbal feedback from their instructors in an individual meeting but only 25% of respondents actually received feedback face-to-face (National Union of Students, 2008). Although online instructors cannot meet with students face-to-face, they can hold personalized synchronous video calls with students. However, this approach still reduces student flexibility in time and can be time consuming for the instructor. A possible solution could be for instructors to establish a sense of closeness with students in a synchronous video call at the start of the semester and then maintain that relationship by providing students with asynchronous video feedback. This approach would provide students with a high level of flexibility while also providing students with “the social interactions and human touch they are used to in a face-to-face classroom” (Graham, 2006, p. 9).

Our review of the literature identified research examining asynchronous video feedback and synchronous video communication respectively. However, we found that both areas are under-researched, and we were unable to identify any research that has considered how instructors can effectively blend these two modes of communication. Furthermore, research examining synchronous video communication focuses on whole group instruction and the
research on asynchronous video feedback focuses primarily on undergraduate teaching. In this study we addressed this need by investigating an online graduate course where the instructor met with students individually in synchronous video calls at the start and end of the semester and then used asynchronous text and video communication to provide quality feedback and maintain a sense of presence and closeness with the student.

This qualitative case study examined student perceptions of video communication with their instructor in an online research and writing course for sport and recreation graduate students. All students participated in two personalized Skype video calls with the instructor and received two video and text feedback critiques of their written projects. Eight students were interviewed following the course. Despite minor technological and scheduling concerns, students found that their Skype calls helped to form a relationship with their instructor and improved their confidence in the course. Students found that video feedback recordings on their written projects were elaborate and friendly while text feedback comments tended to be more convenient, efficient, and concise. However, all students reported that the advantages of video feedback outweighed the advantages of text. The study concluded with recommendations for future researchers and for online instructors who wish to effectively blend these forms of communication.