

Student and Faculty Perspectives of Quality Online Learning Experiences

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Abstract

This research aims to improve faculty development programs for online teaching and learning by learning more about students' perceptions of "great" and "poor" online education practices. Using a qualitative exploratory approach, data was gathered from student and faculty participants who were enrolled in or had taught online courses. As part of the research, three themes, communication, course structure and content, and teacher qualities, were explored. While both students and teachers cited communication as the most crucial component, students also discussed the value of a well-structured course and current course materials, as well as a variety of emotional and supportive qualities like adaptability, friendliness, and care. Findings were used to create models of great and poor online teaching characteristics.

Keywords

online learning; online teaching; online student experiences; online faculty development

Student and Faculty Perspectives of a Quality Online Learning Experience

Studying student perceptions of online learning experiences is vital for improving student learning and increasing retention (Blackmon & Major, 2012). While researchers have developed several frameworks for studying and understanding student experiences in online courses, one framework that guided the research team's past work is the Community of Inquiry (CoI). Developed by Garrison et al. (2000), the CoI involves three forms of presence, teaching, social, and cognitive, that can impact a student's educational experience. This paper explores student and faculty perspectives of their online course experiences. In particular, it examines student perspectives regarding what constitutes "great" and "poor" online teaching and teachers' views of "great" online teaching characteristics. Furthermore, this paper compares the findings with the established CoI framework, and the results of this study will be used to inform future faculty development initiatives to improve student experience and retention at the studied institution.

This research was an exploratory qualitative study to identify what students and faculty perceived as quality in online teaching. Data was collected through surveys distributed to students and faculty who had taken or taught an online course through the regional campuses of a public midwestern university in 2021. The findings were used to create student and faculty models of the qualities of online teaching and learning. The following research questions guided the work:

- How do students describe the great and poor qualities of online teaching?
- How do faculty describe the qualities of great online teachers?
- How do the findings relate to the CoI framework?

Literature Review

Even before the global COVID-19 pandemic, distance education was the one sector of higher education enrollment that saw consistent growth year-to-year, with over a third of all students taking at least one distance education course as early as 2016 (Seaman et al., 2018). With the higher education landscape growing increasingly more competitive, many institutions are investing heavily in distance or online education programs as part of their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2015). As distance education has expanded from correspondence courses, radio, and television to the current ubiquitous online format, many rules, regulations, and standards have evolved to ensure consistency and quality across institutions (Kentnor, 2015). This has led to several ways to measure and define "quality" in online education.

According to Stracke (2019), the quality of online education is determined by applying the most effective instructional strategies supported by data. According to Safdar et al. (2020), a quality online course is intuitive and accessible. In the previous two decades, online education has expanded, and, to support this expansion, institutions have developed faculty development and training programs specific to online teaching and learning (Andrews & Hu, 2021; Leslie, 2020; McMurty, 2013; Roman et al., 2010). While previous research has sought to outline core online teaching competencies (Martin et al., 2019), the need for enhanced programming has become increasingly apparent with the impact of COVID-19 on education (Hartshorne et al., 2020).

The need for enhanced faculty training to improve the quality of online education may be apparent; however, as noted by Gómez-Rey et al. (2016) "quality is evaluated differently depending on the organization in charge of measuring it" (p. 146). While standards and recommendations from researchers and governing organizations can aid in the administrative regulation of online programs and the design of online courses, course and teaching evaluations,

along with overall course grades, have historically provided much of the feedback to determine the effectiveness of course design and instructional approaches (Lizzio et al., 2002; Hu, 2020). However, in addition to suggestions of gender bias inherent in some evaluation instruments (Hu, 2020), formal evaluations can often suffer from a top-down approach, from administration to faculty to students, that can make it "difficult to know if students actually deem as important the same aspects of quality as administrators and faculty do, or if they are merely evaluating those aspects which have already been determined a priori" (Ortiz-Rodríguez et al., 2005, p. 98).

There is a need for additional research on how students perceive the quality of their online learning experiences (Ortiz- Rodríguez et al., 2005). Though several respected instruments have already been developed to measure online course experiences including the CoI survey (Garrison et al., 2000), there are aspects of the experience that may not be captured by often-used instruments. Even when students report overall satisfaction with online teaching and learning, Bowne et al. (2022) found the following:

Qualitative comments indicated otherwise, with many negative comments related to lack of communication between faculty and students, higher expectations given without explanations, more assignments without relationship to the course objectives or content, technology issues that arose due to faculty's requests, and feelings that faculty were not prepared or trained for online teaching or virtual learning. (p. 38)

Identifying and elucidating gaps in the available data is crucial as understanding the student experience in online courses and programs can be critical for the future of institutions. Students who report positive experiences are more likely to re-enroll in online courses in the future, so an institution seeking to increase online enrollment and retention could benefit from such information (Berg et al., 2019; Blackmon & Major, 2012).

Quality online instruction and satisfaction involves understanding and addressing areas of improvement. In addition to faculty, administrators should also understand the issues facing

faculty and students in online courses (Tanner et al., 2009). While course evaluation surveys provide broad information on student perceptions, the current tools for gathering information on student experiences often does not give specific, clear, and motivating bases for planning instruction improvements (Lizzio et al., 2002).

Theoretical Framework

The CoI framework involves three interrelated cognitive, social, and teaching presences (Garrison et al., 2000). Garrison et al. (2000) theorized that these three presences influence a student's experience in online courses: cognitive presence is the degree to which participants "...construct meaning through sustained communication" (p.89); social presence refers to community members projecting "...their personal characteristics into the community" (p. 89); and teaching presence involves the course design, content, learning activities, and assessments with the role "...to support and enhance social and cognitive presence for the purpose of realizing educational outcomes" (p. 90). While the data analysis approach of this research was exploratory, it was theorized that the findings would reflect many aspects of the CoI framework, specifically the interactions among teachers, students, and course content. The student survey included two open-ended questions on what students thought made for "great" and "poor" online teaching, with the goal to learn what students perceived to help their learning experience and the characteristics or practices that impacted their learning experience. Faculty were asked about their perspectives on qualities that lead to "good" online learning experiences for students. The analysis of the collected data led to the development of student and faculty models and subsequent comparison to the CoI framework.

Method

Research Design Overview

The host institution's Review Board (IRB) determined the research to be exempt (protocol ID: 04225e). Using an exploratory qualitative research design, surveys were administered with open-ended items to collect data from students and faculty who had taken or taught online courses through the regional campuses of a public midwestern university.

Researcher Descriptions

The research team consists of two faculty members, an instructional designer, and the coordinator of faculty engagement. The team has worked extensively with each other on several online education projects, including research, faculty training development, workshops, and learning communities.

Setting and Sample

Study participants included students and faculty taking or teaching online courses through the regional campuses of a public midwestern university. All students enrolled in online courses the previous year were invited to complete a survey. Out of 4,210 students, 83 participated (n=83). Of these, 12 were residential students enrolled on the main university campus, and 71 were nonresident students on the regional campuses. Fifty-five, purposefully-sampled faculty members were invited to complete a separate survey, of which 21 responded (n=21). The sample was created based on the extent of online teaching experience and a cross-section of academic departments.

Data Collection

Separate Qualtrics surveys were emailed to the student and faculty samples. The student survey included an open-ended item asking about what led to a good learning experience and a

second open-ended item asking what led to a poor learning experience. Participants in the faculty survey were questioned regarding their perceptions of the talents and qualities of exceptional online educators, and this item was also open-ended.

Analysis

Qualitative methods described by Saldaña (2021), including descriptive and pattern coding, were followed. Descriptive coding requires identifying one or more words representing a passage's main topic. For context, Saldaña (2021) compares descriptive coding to using hashtags in social media.

Three sets of descriptive codes were generated, two sets of codes for the student responses and one set of codes for the faculty responses. Each of the researchers independently engaged in descriptive coding of the survey responses. Comparing and discussing the results included conducting frequency counts of the descriptive codes and calculating the amount of agreement among the researchers. Saldaña (2021) notes that a minimum target coder agreement statistic does not exist and care should be taken when applying interrater reliability in qualitative analysis. Only codes where at least two of the four researchers agreed were included, and models were created representing the three themes and related codes. Based on the number of mentions and the interpreted emphasis of the responses, some categories were more prevalent.

For the second round of analysis, pattern coding was used to develop themes and theoretical relationships. Miles and Huberman (1994) described pattern codes as "...explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation" (p. 69). Miles et al. (2014) further describe the role of pattern coding in a two-cycle analysis scheme where segments of data are summarized in the First Cycle and then grouped "into a smaller number of categories, themes, or constructs" during the Second Cycle (p. 90).

The research team created a shared document that included the research purpose, questions, and framework to help bridge the second cycle coding method. The team then engaged in nearly weekly meetings to discuss the project and data over a five month period. While coding and discussing the data, three questions Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2007) suggest researchers ask themselves were kept in mind: "what surprised me, what intrigued me, and what disturbed me" (p. 106).

Findings

Student Participants

Students were asked what makes for a great online teacher and what makes for a poor online teacher. While there was an expected inverse in responses to the two questions, some differences emerged. Table 1 provides the topic codes and frequencies in responses to the "great online teacher" item.

Table 1

Student Survey: Qualities and Characteristics of a Great Online Teacher

Code	Frequency
Communication	49.4%
Feedback	19.8%
Accessible	16.0%
Understanding	12.3%
Course structure/design	11.1%
Engagement	9.9%
Flexibility	9.9%
Videos	9.9%
Clarity	8.6%
Grading	7.4%
Encouraging	7.4%
Peer engagement	4.9%
Helpful	3.7%
Current/up to date	2.5%
Kind	2.5%
Interaction	2.5%

Code	Frequency
Course materials	2.5%
Realistic	1.2%
Friendly	1.2%
Clear instructions	1.2%
Positive	1.2%
Organized	1.2%
Quick/timely	1.2%

Communication was the most prevalent theme, accounting for 49.4% of coded responses with a high degree of agreement among the coders (92.5%). Other high-frequency codes include feedback (19.8%), accessible (16.0%), understanding (12.3%), and course design (11.1%). Table 2 shows the topic codes, percent of responses that included the code, and coder agreement percentages for the "poor online teacher" item. The highest frequency codes include communication (35.8%), uncaring (17.3%), unkind (13.6%), engagement (12.3%), not teaching (12.3%), content (11.1%), and accessibility (11.1%).

Table 2

Student Survey: Qualities and Characteristics of a Poor Online Teacher

Code	Frequency
Communication	35.8%
Uncaring	17.3%
Unkind	13.6%
Engagement	12.3%
Not teaching	12.3%
Content	11.1%
Accessibility	11.1%
Clarity	6.2%
Ego	6.2%
Feedback	4.9%
Boring	3.7%
Unsupportive	3.7%
Flexibility	2.5%
Unprofessional	2.5%
Grading	1.2%

Code	Frequency
Groupwork	1.2%
Course Design	1.2%
Structure	1.2%
Course Management	1.2%

It was observed that the poor online teaching topic codes clustered into three distinct groups.: Communication, Course Structure and Content, and Teacher Qualities. These were identified as the primary themes of the findings.

Communication

Communication was the most prevalent theme. Participant responses emphasized the importance of good communication practices and the impact of undesirable practices. The following quote from a student survey response includes a specific reference to what the participant considered to be timely communication:

The teachers who were engaged led to a good and positive experience. When I say engaged, I mean reached out to the students regularly (at least once a week) and provided insight throughout the course. They assisted in the learning process, acknowledged questions in a timely manner (within 24 hours), and replied with constructive informative answers. They took the time to encourage and help students through active communications.

Several negative responses associated with communication, specifically to the issues of timeliness and the quality of feedback, were evident in the analysis. Table 3 includes some representative participant responses.

Table 3*Selected Negative Student Participant Responses, Communication Theme*

Response
“Teachers that were always behind putting grades in because it did not give me feedback on what to do better before the next assignment.”
“Teachers who don't provide any feedback whatsoever (they don't fill out the rubric, they don't comment on assignments, they just assign a grade).”
“They would send out an email at the start of the course and intermittently or weeks later.”
“It is very frustrating when certain assignments have multiple parts to be expected to submit part 2 or 3 without ever having had grades/feedback on part 1 to know that you're on the right track.”

Course Structure and Content

Course structure and content was the second theme. The analysis showed that positive responses included focusing on resources such as having videos, being flexible, teachers as experts, and teachers who are good with technology (see Table 4). Participants who responded negatively often justified their actions by saying they were “teaching themselves” (see Table 5).

Table 4*Selected Positive Student Participant Responses, Course Structure and Content Theme*

Response
“The teachers who set up the course so that you can work ahead are my favorite. The purpose of an online class is in my opinion is to work within your own schedule before the assigned due dates. I feel like the best classes are the ones created for the online environment and not an in person class just shoved into an online environment.”
“I appreciated most, the effort some instructors took to post vlog-style "lectures" preparing us for or responding to reading and assignments. The instructors are expert in their fields. Those who can leverage the technology best can share that expertise across the medium and can approximate an IRL learning experience. Synchronous check-ins with other students help too.”

Response

“These teachers appreciate student comments about broken links, typos, confusing instructions, etc. that they react upon to improve the quality of the online course.”

Table 5

Selected Negative Student Participant Responses, Course Structure and Content Theme

Response

“With online courses it feels like sometimes you are teaching yourself. If the teacher is open and lets you know they are there to help it feels a little less like you are doing the teaching.”

“Professors who do not take assignments/grading seriously. I have had professors who obviously do not read the assignments submitted. After putting a lot of time and effort into the assignment, this certainly does not promote a positive learning experience.”

“Teachers who have a disorganized Canvas site: modules not in chronological order, numbering schemes for assignments and modules that are confusing, due dates that don't give enough time between receiving feedback on previous assignment and time to revise before submitting the next assignment.”

“Also, when the quizzes and exams did not cover the material presented or the questions were ambiguous it made for a stressful situation.”

“Current information (for instance, if I see a video that was produced in 2015, I wonder how relevant the information is now).”

A subtheme emerged within Course Structure and Content. Several student participants reported negative experiences in online courses where the teacher and course content developer were different people.

Table 6

Student participant responses, poor teaching practices

Response

“Most of the poor classes have been instructors that were not the creators of the class content and made no effort to review/update the course template prior to releasing to students. It's pretty frustrating to see where the content creator has put comments like ‘replace with your stuff here’ that they completely disregard and do not update, or with dates that apply to previous semesters, sometimes more than a year ago.”

Response

“Hand-me-down material that was created by another instructor that lacked any sort of unique educational quality to the online instructor.”

“Instructors who did not take ownership over the courses they teach. I am just an adjunct so I can't fix xyz even though I know there is an issue with the course.”

Teacher Qualities

Teacher qualities emerged as the third theme, and several participants referred to the perceived social-emotional characteristics of teachers, including mentions of well-being, caring, and understanding. Tables 7 and 8 include example responses.

Table 7*Selected Positive Student Participant Responses, Teacher Qualities Theme*

Response

“I'd say the minority were actually good and helpful and caring. What made them so was they actually cared about the well-being of their students. They wanted their students to succeed for the students' sake not just to reflect well on the teacher.”

“Willingness to always help with questions and/or schedule zoom meetings outside of class. Never making you feel like an inconvenience, but instead like the questions are welcomed and encouraged.”

“A caring demeanor but also a demeanor that shows students are accountable and teachers owe them no special favors.”

“Understanding. Sometimes things happen like you forget to save something or your wife goes out for some unexpected reason. It is very important to be mindful that these things happen.”

Table 8*Selected Negative Student Participant Responses, Teacher Qualities Theme*

Response

“Teachers who want students to go through what the teacher went through, meaning to endure mental and emotional suffering, instead of learning material and demonstrating growth.”

Response

“When they act annoyed by questions. Some teachers act annoyed by students trying to really learn.”

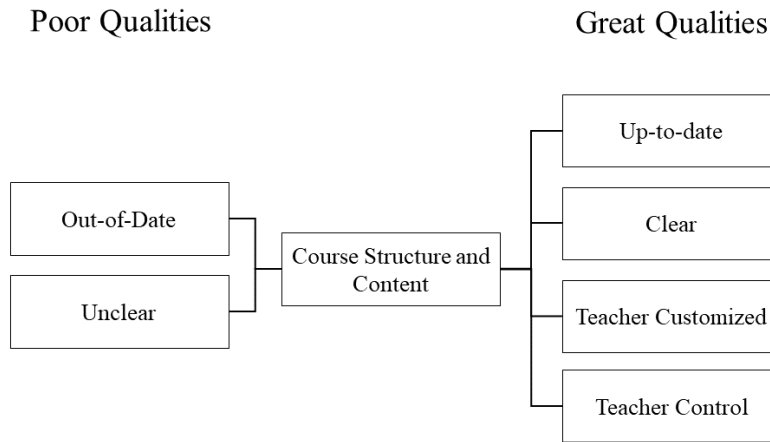
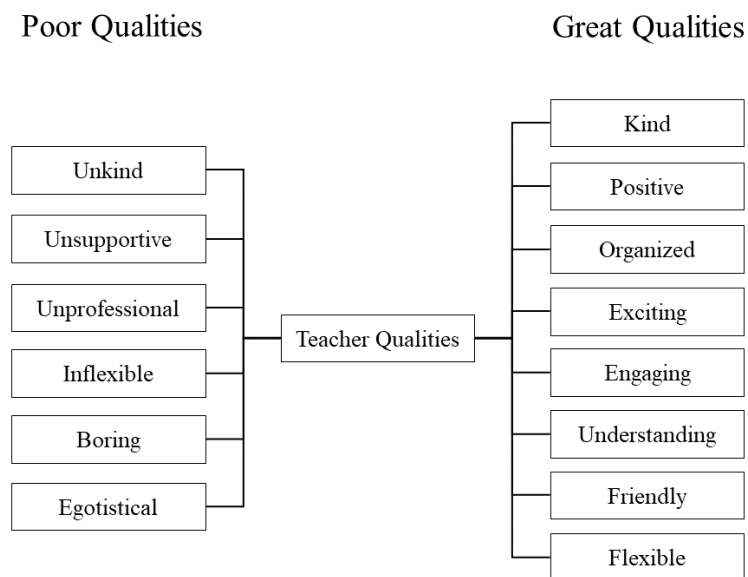
Overlapping Themes

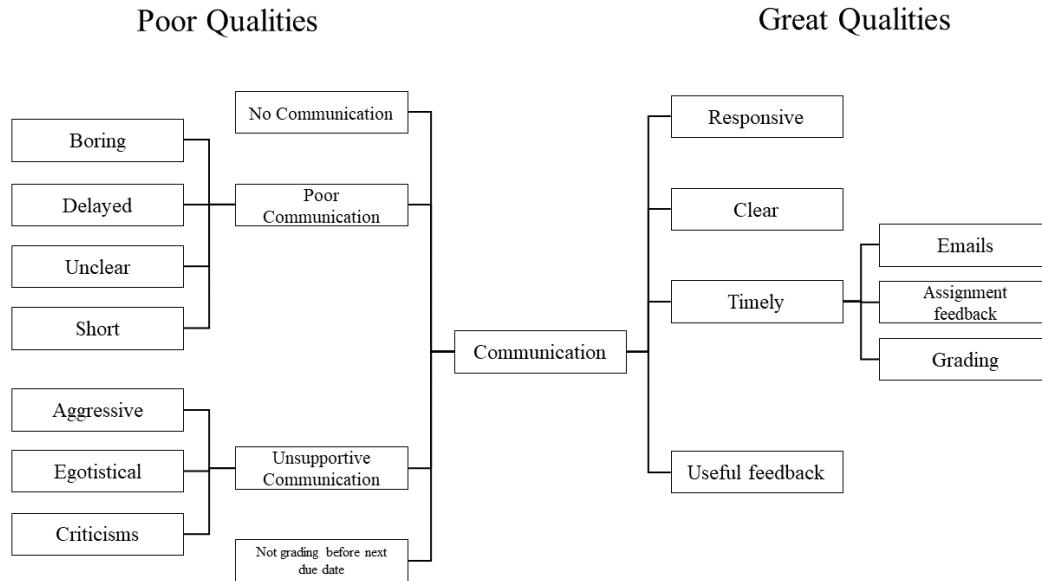
The following student response represents the intersection of all three themes:

Prompt response to emails. Positive attitude and politeness when replying to questions via email. Personalized responses to email (including my name instead of just opening the email with "Hi"). Flexibility with deadlines when Canvas or other online resources were not functioning properly. Teachers focused on helping students learn, rather than trying to be popular by covering "interesting" topics. Teachers focused on efficient use of what actually works to help individual students learn, instead of expecting students to use every possible method available to engage with the course material. Teachers who know how to make assignments that are adaptable to individual student learning styles, instead of a rigid, one size fits MOST approach.

Student Models

After identifying the three main themes of communication, course structure and content, and teacher qualities, pattern coding was used to identify relationships and categories to help in creating visual models of the participant responses. Figure 1 shows the model for communication, Figure 2 shows the model for course structure and content, and Figure 3 shows the model for teacher qualities.

Figure 1. Student perspective model of communication in online learning**Figure 2. Student perspective model of course structure and content in online learning****Figure 3. Student perspective model of teacher qualities in online learning**



Faculty Participants

Faculty were asked, "In your opinion, what skills, qualities, and characteristics can be found in a great online teacher?" After topic coding, the same three themes from the student responses were identified: communication, course structure and content, and teacher qualities. Overall, the responses focused on course structure, clarity of instructions, effective and responsive communication, technical proficiency, engagement, and creativity, among others. Table 9 shows the topic codes for the faculty responses, the percentage of faculty responses that included the code, and the percentage of coder agreement. For example, 59.1% of codes were tagged as "Communication," and, of those, 61.5% of those codes were tagged by all four researchers.

Table 9

Faculty Survey: Qualities and characteristics of a great online teacher

Code	Frequency
Communication	59.09%
Organization	36.36%

Code	Frequency
Technology expertise	36.36%
Creativity	13.64%
Engagement	9.09%
Patience	9.09%
Flexibility	4.55%
Subject Matter Expert	4.55%
Knowledge	4.55%
Course Structure/Content	4.55%

Communication

Of faculty responses to the item on what makes for great online teaching, 59.1% of responses were coded as communication-related. Within communication, participants described both communicating to understand course components and communicating to create a connection with students. Subthemes were also identified across these codes, including consistent and timely communication, clarity in assignment instructions, and a deeper level of communication with students. Table 10 includes faculty participant quotes that are representative of supporting this theme.

Table 10

Student participant responses, poor teaching practices

Response

“It is essential to provide reminders, timely feedback, and to return emails (yes, even on weekends and evening[s] because many times students taking online courses are doing so because the times they are doing school work are after work and family obligations - not during the typical school day)”

“The need for absolute clarity in assignment instructions offering diverse ways to read, listen, watch, interact with course content”

“Strong communication skills that go beyond delivering a message to carefully craft a message to emote respect and empathy.”

“Communicating with students often and being very responsive to email to emphasize the instructor's presence.”

Response

“Timely grading and detailed feedback”

Course Structure and Content

Faculty participants described course structure and organization, up-to-date content, and engaging learning materials, including videos, as important aspects of great online teaching.

Teacher Qualities

Responses related to teacher qualities spanned a range of attributes and activities. Several faculty participants discussed the importance of the differences in serving nontraditional students and developing relationships. Table 11 includes representative quotes.

Table 11

Student participant responses, poor teaching practices

Response

“What I already knew is that the MOST IMPORTANT THING is establishing rapport with my students. Without a strong relationship built on trust and respect, students will not engage.”

"Someone who is able to build a connection with students virtually, extremely responsive and a good communicator and someone who values the students' need to utilize a more flexible format of learning.”

“Also the ability to be very approachable -- students are more likely to reach out to you when struggling when they believe you are approachable and that you care about them as an individual.”

Overlapping Themes

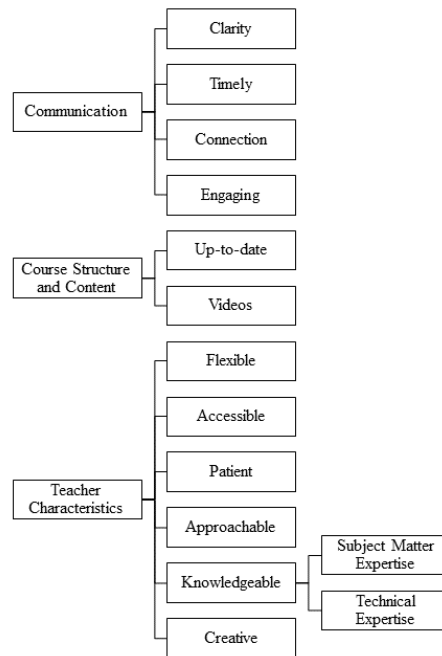
One participant's response cut across these categories and incorporated teacher qualities, quality course content, and communication.

Probably the same found in a great FtF [face-to-face] teacher: clarity, organization, being responsive to student questions, being approachable (i.e., immediate). A different way of looking at this is what qualities should be avoided: assignments that are busy work, a lack of clear connection between the assignment and course content, not responding to student emails or student contact, playing the guess what is in my head game (i.e., not being clear with students and they have to guess what you want).

Faculty Model

After engaging in pattern coding the faculty data, a model of faculty observations of great online teaching was created. It is presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Faculty perspective model of teacher qualities in online learning



Comparison to the CoI Framework

The CoI framework involves teaching, social, and cognitive presence. Garrison et al. (2000) have discussed the role of communication across each of the areas which conveys in this

research, given the importance of communication throughout the findings. Thus, student perceptions of the importance of communication, at least between student and teacher, is a critical part of an excellent online learning experience for students.

Returning to the CoI model to compare how the findings matched with the framework, Teaching Presence was found to be heavily represented in the models, Cognitive Presence less so, and Social Presence almost non-existent. The CoI survey items under Teaching Presence focus on communication, teacher helpfulness, encouragement, and timeliness, and Cognitive Presence items concentrate on course content impacting learning. Since survey questions in this research focused on the teaching quality in online courses, this is not surprising. However, the impact of the teacher on the quality of student experiences in online courses is clear.

Discussion

This research aims to understand better the factors that faculty and students perceive with online teaching. The same three primary themes of communication, course structure and content, and teacher qualities are found with both faculty and student participants, though it was noted that faculty responses are more holistic while student responses often refer to specific incidents. However, student and faculty perceptions of characteristics of excellent online teaching and learning are similar. This finding was echoed in research by Gómez-Rey et al. (2016), "Teachers and students' perceptions also have some things in common: they both consider the learning support and learning platform variables as irrelevant in determining the quality of an online program" (p. 157).

This study's most prevalent theme related to teacher and student experiences is communication. The findings of Ortiz-Rodríguez et al. (2005) were similar as "Communication was the factor identified by most students as contributing to quality in distance education

courses" (p. 101). Other characteristics found in the study include teacher accessibility and social-emotive traits. Turk et al. (2022) found that student-perceived teaching and social presence were predictors of perceived satisfaction and other students' psychological needs. In a synthesis of the qualitative literature, Blackmon and Major (2012) found that the accessibility of the instructor was critical to a positive student experience.

The findings align in part with Frazer et al. (2017) as faculty perceptions of effective online teaching practices included an instructor who "(a) facilitates student learning, (b) aims to feel connected with students in the classroom, (c) shares experiences, (d) is approachable, (e) establishes mutual comfort, and (f) is responsive to students' needs" (Frazer et al., 2017, Findings section, para. 2). However, students report different experience in the current online learning environment. Student perceptions indicate a lack of communication between faculty and students, expectations without explanation, non-related assignments to course objectives or content, technology issues, and faculty need to prepare and train for online teaching (Bowne et al., 2022).

Both students and faculty have responsibilities in online courses (Blackmon & Major, 2012). One student participant echoes, "A caring demeanor but also a demeanor that shows students are accountable and teachers owe them no special favors." While the importance of humanizing the teacher-student relationship must be noted, attention must still be paid to the responsibilities each has to the education process.

Limitations

This study is limited in several areas. First, although the collected qualitative data was rich and provided much insight, the student survey had a low response rate. Additionally, the researchers have worked closely in online learning at the studied institution for a considerable

time. While their familiarity with the program may have aided in the analysis, there may be some impartiality in analyzing the data. As for generalizing to other student populations, the comparison to the CoI model shows overlap; however, student populations can differ greatly from one institution to another, especially within nontraditional student populations. Thus, it's advised that institutions perform their own local studies to identify topics for faculty development by identifying what their student population perceives as good online teaching.

Study Implications and Future Research

This study explores the lesser-studied aspects of online course experiences of students. Since student populations and organizational cultures vary by institution, each student may hold their own expectations and these differences may be more significant and more varied in nontraditional student populations. Another primary concern is faculty teaching courses with materials they did not develop who need the ability or power to change or make updates. Student participants note it was clear when this occurred, leading to poor learning experiences. This paper reviews the perceptions of the quality of online teaching from both student and faculty perspectives. Based on this, it is recommended that professional development for online teachers focus on the execution of online courses. This does not mean ignoring the quality of courses as described in the literature, but rather that the importance of the teacher-student relationship is clearly reflected in student responses and should have special emphasis within any professional development programs for online teaching.

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