

Faculty Expectations Toward Their Online Courses: Are They on the Same Screen with Their Students?

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This action research study explored attitudes and expectations of faculty at a Midwestern university who taught at least one fully online course during 2014. The study focused on instructor perceptions toward and experiences with web-based instruction, particularly in the critical areas of assessment and feedback; course organization; interaction with students; course flexibility; and overall communication. Findings were then compared to student responses from the authors' previous study. A mixed-methods electronic survey blended a quantitative component in the form of 21 fixed response items with a qualitative element accomplished through two narrative response questions where content analysis was used to compress many words of text into content categories based on explicit rules of coding. A total of 134 faculty members participated, and findings revealed that instructors are becoming more deliberate about their actions as they seek to develop "teaching presence" that extends beyond the managerial and technical aspects of their interactions with students. There was growing agreement between faculty and student expectations, with room for further improvement, as both faculty and students adjust to this new delivery system and the need for clarity, timeliness, and course designs that integrate the best of technological possibilities with the preferred "human" qualities of the traditional classroom.

Introduction

As recently as 2013, 7.1 million students were taking at least one online course, and while the growth rate of 6.1 % from the previous year was the lowest since 2002, it is still many times larger than the growth rate for the overall higher education student body (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Moreover, those institutions with no online offerings represent a distinct minority within higher education, and there are virtually no public institutions that have not made some type of foray into the online and distance learning arena (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Given this undisputed prevalence of online education, the need to continually reevaluate the medium from the perspectives of those most affected by these rapid changes is essential in order to address quality assurance and provide performance metrics within distance learning programs. Without continuous data to guide future course development, delivery, and pedagogy, retention in online courses and programs will inevitably become more problematic and uncertain (Huss & Eastep, 2013).

Arguably, the transition from on-campus to online has had the most profound effect upon faculty members. According to Phillips, Wells, Ice, Curtis, and Kenney (2007), instructors who attempt to teach online courses with traditional teaching styles and mindsets often find themselves in conflict with not only their teaching methods, but also their very role in the college or university. Even as the distance education phenomenon was commencing, both the lack of face-to-face contact and the largely asynchronous nature of the environment were foreseen to present instructors with educational challenges as well as “a new set of physical, emotional, and psychological issues” (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p.7). Wanstreet (2006) pointed out that online faculty do not always know what forms of interaction students need, want, or expect in support of their learning. Faculty also question whether the overall quality of face-to-face can be replicated online, especially for complex or novel content (Ward, Peters, & Shelley, 2010).

As online instructors, we realized that our university has witnessed a growth from 82 online courses taught in 2006 to close to 500 in 2014 (Educational Outreach, 2014), and saw a great need to be proactive and collect data from our own faculty across campus in an effort to better understand existing practices and identify elements for potential change and progression. Our approach is consistent with the work of Elliott (1991) and his assertion that educational action research enables practitioners to critique structures which shape their practice and provides the power to negotiate change within the system that maintains them. Elliott (2003) also argued that teachers and their collaborators should gather multiple perspectives on the situation in question from colleagues, students, and others. Thus, we were intentional about underscoring the collaborative nature of action research as we merged our interests as online instructors, Shannon’s expertise as Distance Learning Coordinator, and the needs of prominent stakeholders from the Offices of Educational Outreach and Information Technology.

This study is grounded in the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000), which is a process model of online learning that emphasizes the idea that building community must be a deliberate objective and not something assumed to be inherent. CoI views the online educational experience as evolving from the interaction of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Both cognitive and social presence are closely tied to and supported by teaching presence, described as the “instructors’ ability to project themselves in online courses” (Swan, 2003, p. 24). Teaching presence, which is of particular interest in this endeavor, establishes the course structure that makes it possible for all

members to realize the intended learning outcomes (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Indeed, course design, structure, and leadership affect the extent that learners engage in deep learning of course content (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). This study likewise embraced the literature on the four types of interaction that are integral to the online classroom: learner-learner, learner-instructor, learner-content, and learner-interface (Ehrlich, 2002; Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000).

We had previously investigated student perceptions of online learning (Huss & Eastep, 2013), so the purpose of the current study was to conduct a direct follow up to that inquiry and compare the attitudes and expectations of online *faculty* to those of students within the same Midwestern university. To accomplish this end, faculty who had taught at least one fully online course during 2014 were asked the same questionnaire items to which students had responded in fall 2012. We focused on faculty perspectives toward web-based instruction and what these instructors consider their approach to and experiences with the essential areas of course format; interaction with students; course flexibility and pace; assessment and feedback; and overall accessibility. These perceptions were contrasted with student data to determine areas of congruence and dissimilarity.

A Look at the Literature on the Role of Faculty in Online Teaching

Student Perceptions

While the literature pertaining to distance education has been plentiful over the past decade, much of it has centered on student characteristics, notably the comparisons between online and face-to-face achievement, or the assessment of student attitudes toward web-based learning. Even those studies that examined faculty characteristics deemed to be integral to successful online experiences were carried out by surveying or interviewing *students*, but not faculty members themselves. In an early study, Arbaugh (2001) surveyed 25 web-based sections in an MBA program at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, and reported that the instructor's use of immediacy behaviors, including use of humor or emoticons, referring to the student by name in written communication, prompt feedback, and sharing of personal examples, are better predictors of student satisfaction than an instructor's mastery of the online technology.

Similarly, when Herbert (2006) investigated student retention in online courses at a medium-sized Midwestern university using the Noel-Levitz Priorities Survey for Online Learners™ (PSOL), the most important variable in student satisfaction was responsiveness of the faculty to

student needs, which supports a contention that regardless of the course delivery system, students still have an expectation of faculty interaction and support. Numerous studies highlighted the importance of social presence in online courses (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2011; Richardson & Swan, 2003) and suggested that simple strategies, such as one-on-one e-mails and detailed feedback, are more successful methods for creating social presence than sophisticated strategies.

Faculty Perceptions

Only 38% of faculty members either agree or strongly agree that online education can be as effective as in-person instruction in helping students learn, yet 60% of faculty reported that they had recommended an online course to a student advisee (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Osborne, Kriese, Tobey, and Johnson (2009) explored faculty perceptions about teaching online courses and suggested that faculty who come to distance learning after having taught for a considerable amount of time through traditional methods may construct an online learning environment that is appreciably different than those instructors who are digital natives. Moreover, faculty inexperienced with online teaching formats may simply “post” the same material they prepare for face-to-face instruction and consider it sufficient for online teaching (Levitch & Milhelm, 2003; McQuiggan, 2007). Baran, Correia and Thompson (2011) argued that professional development for online teachers is typically focused on standards and competencies, but lacks emphasis on critical reflection, faculty empowerment, or integrating technology into pedagogy. White, Roberts and Brannan (2003) examined course design in online education and stated that “unless the course is reconceptualized using an interactive learning pedagogy, the results are nothing more than a correspondence course via e-mail and that simply transferring a traditional classroom-based course to an online format is doomed to failure” (p. 172). When considering the ideal forms of support required for an online learning environment, there is consistently a strong argument made for an active, involved teacher (Laurillard, 1993).

Santilli and Beck (2005) surveyed 47 doctoral faculty from Nova Southeastern University Fischler School of Education and Human Services (FSEHS) concerning their perceptions of an instructor’s role in e-learning and revealed the majority of faculty time in online courses is spent communicating with students, and building and sustaining learning communities. Such a finding harkens back to an observation made by Rosenberg (2001): “What is emerging most clearly from the technological explosion is, ironically enough, a refocusing on people” (p. 120). When

isolating what they perceived as obstacles to effective online communication, faculty cited a deficiency in students' technology skills as well as the lack of timeliness of student responses. Huang and Hsiao (2012) interviewed 16 online instructors at a Midwest university and found that faculty members appreciated the convenience, flexibility, and potentially diverse student populations made possible by distance education, but asserted that online teaching has a heavier workload than face-to-face, and miscommunication is more likely to occur online in asynchronous text-based environments.

Direct Comparisons of Student and Faculty Perceptions

Research that specifically sets up side-by-side comparisons between student and faculty perceptions of distance learning are not abundant in the literature. One such investigation used an online survey tool with 1,208 online undergraduate students that had taken at least one course online and 267 currently teaching, online faculty members at a Missouri university and revealed that students placed a significantly higher emphasis on the importance of creating an open and inviting climate of communication; the value of course introductions; instructor communication in discussion threads; and the usefulness of grade book comments. Instructors placed significantly higher importance on the use of e-mail communication; accommodating of student disabilities; and communicating clearly in writing. Interestingly, three-fourths of online faculty considered threaded discussions as being "very important" for online communication, while only 54% of students shared this impression (Eske & Schulte, 2012).

Ward, Peters, and Shelley (2010) employed a mixed methods design with faculty interviews and student surveys to look at faculty and student attitudes toward synchronous interactive online instruction (SIOI) in graduate level educational leadership courses and found that both viewed SIOI favorably, particularly when judged against asynchronous learning, which was perceived by participants to be inferior to face-to-face and SIOI in terms of overall quality. Tanner, Noser, and Totero (2009) also utilized a survey administered to both online undergraduate Business students and Business faculty at two regional universities in the southern United States and reported that faculty were stronger in their perception that online courses essentially require students to teach themselves the material. While students expressed that the technology required to take online classes increases the value of the experience, faculty respondents disagreed. For faculty, seemingly the value of the course is found in the content of

the material disseminated, while the method (online or in the traditional classroom) is of lesser importance.

Summary

The literature has suggested that faculty attitudes toward web-based instruction can be influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, the level of desire to provide innovative instruction, perceived intellectual challenge, time requirements, and overall proficiency with technology (Windes & Lesht, 2014). Perry and Edwards (2004) emphasized that the educational experience at the core of the CoI model is a convergence of the experiences of both the learner and the teacher, a proposition requiring “further study in follow-up research where the perspectives of both teachers and learners are gathered and compared” (p. 7). In order to assess current practices at our university and recognize areas for potential change and professional development, we asked faculty members across our entire university campus, encompassing multiple distinct colleges, to provide feedback on their attitudes toward online teaching and learning, thus providing a means by which we could contrast those perceptions directly with students who responded to the same questionnaire items. Inasmuch as the instructors and students are the two pivotal shareholders in the online phenomenon, it is essential to determine if the expectations they hold for the web-based experience are parallel, or if one group is presuming a set of outcomes and procedures that is not anticipated by the other. We sought to bring clarity as well as practical applicability of findings to this ongoing inquiry.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The university at which this study was conducted has roughly 2,600 faculty and staff, and services over 15,000 students in a tri-state region. The Associate Director of Educational Outreach for the University had previously provided email addresses for the 4,695 students who were enrolled in at least one online course for the fall 2012 semester, and those students were sent an electronic questionnaire. The IT Business Warehouse, with permission from the Office of the Registrar, supplied email addresses for the instructors who were listed as teaching at least one online course during 2014. The electronic survey was piloted with a small sample of faculty

within our College. The electronic survey, with only minor adaptations in language to reflect the instructor versus student role, was then disseminated to each of the 350 potential respondents during the fall semester. Table 1 displays the numbers of faculty who responded from the various Colleges across the university.

Table 1. College Affiliation

College	Response (n=134)
College of Arts and Sciences	44 (32.8%)
College of Education and Human Services	29 (21.6 %)
College of Informatics	27 (20.2%)
College of Health Professions	20 (14.9%)
College of Business	12 (9.0%)
College of Law	1(.75%)
No Specific Affiliation	1 (.75%)

Approximately 53% of the respondents indicated they had taught at the University more than 10 years, with 25% between 6-10 years, and 23% had taught 0-5 years. Seventy five percent identified themselves as University faculty, 22% as adjunct instructors, and 2% as staff members who had taught an online course. Roughly 60% of participants were female and 40% male. Regarding their involvement with web-based teaching, 68% of the instructors taught one or more classes online, but also taught face-to-face, while 32% taught online exclusively.

Instrument

The electronic survey used in this study was an instrument created by the authors, which blended a quantitative component in the form of 21 fixed response items (five of which were demographic in nature) with a qualitative element accomplished through two narrative response questions that encouraged personalized and reflective answers. The domains used within the survey were influenced by the typology of online interaction by Moore (1989) and included: learner-content interaction, learner-instructor interaction and learner-learner interaction. An outline of the essential questions (minus the demographic items) is found in Appendix A.

Design

The mixed methods employed in this study favor the convergence triangulation design described by Creswell (2013) and Denzin (1978) in which quantitative and qualitative data provide complementary aspects of the same phenomenon. Moreover, “the trustworthiness of information will be greater if quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis are combined rather than being used separately” (Marsland, Wilson, Abeyasekera, & Kleigh, 1998, p.4). Variation in data collection can lead to greater understanding while answering questions from different perspectives, thereby reducing potential gaps (Huss & Eastep, 2013). The objective was to collect data that were robust and comprehensive.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis was achieved through simple description that condensed and refined the raw data. Because the self-reported items were analyzed separately, a scale was not developed. For the narrative responses, an inductive approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was followed to analyze the text generated from open-ended responses, with content analysis the technique to then compress many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Weber, 1990). Broadly defined, content analysis is described as, “any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (Holsti, 1969, p. 14). Narrative responses were analyzed on the basis of word repetitions, indigenous terms, and key-words-in-context. The overall process was adapted from the procedures outlined in Haney, Russell, Gulek, & Fierros (1998), in which the researchers reviewed the material independently and established a set of features that formed a checklist. Second, notes were compared and any differences reconciled that showed up on initial checklists. Third, a consolidated checklist was used to independently apply coding. Inter-rater reliability was assessed with a Cohen's Kappa value of .81. As espoused by Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility and confirmability were enhanced through corroboration from multiple, independent informants.

Results

An overall total of 134 faculty members (38% response) returned the questionnaire, and 1,085 (23%) students completed the instrument in 2012. Response numbers fluctuated for

individual survey items, with various respondents skipping particular questions. All student data were generated in the author's previous study (Huss & Eastep, 2013) and are now presented alongside new faculty data for the purpose of comparison.

Reason for Teaching/Taking an Online Course

While 60% of instructors and 68% of students rated their level of comfort with technology in the 8-10 range on a scale where 10 was the "most comfortable," Table 2 captures the reasons why faculty chose to teach a web-based course and why the students opted to take an online course.

Table 2. Reason for Teaching/Taking Online Class

Reason	Faculty (n=90)	Student (n=1,084)
Not my preference, but no other option	39 (43.3%)	516 (47.6%)
Strictly convenience	32 (35.6%)	399 (36.8%)
I teach/learn best in online environment	19 (21.1%)	83 (7.7%)
None of the above	0 (0%)	86 (7.9%)

Learner-Learner Interaction

The results in this section convey findings related to faculty/student attitudes toward the importance of regular interaction among students and their classmates within an online course. In Table 3, respondents indicate the importance they attach to such interaction.

Table 3. Importance of Regular Interaction with Classmates

Frequency	Faculty (n=127)	Student (n=1,050)
Very Important	101 (52.0%)	101 (9.6%)
Somewhat Important	46 (36.2%)	419 (39.9%)
Not Important at all	15 (11.9%)	530 (50.5%)

As presented in Table 4, respondents were subsequently asked to indicate how they prefer to initiate and accomplish learner-learner interaction.

Table 4. Type of Learner-Learner Interaction Preferred

Type of Interaction	Faculty (n=125)	Student (n=1,050)
Large group discussion board	109 (87.2%)	596 (56.8%)
Small group discussion board	48 (38.4%)	722 (68.8%)
Group projects	45 (36.0%)	281 (26.8%)
Voice generated discussions	12 (9.6%)	109 (10.4%)
Real-time video interaction	9 (7.2%)	86 (8.2%)
Video generated discussions	6 (4.8%)	38 (3.6%)
Other	22 (17.6%)	120 (11.4%)

Note. Respondents could select more than one item.

Learner-Instructor Interaction

The results in this section depict those components of distance education that involve communication between the student and the course instructor. Table 5 displays the promptness with which faculty and students believe that an online instructor should respond to email.

Table 5. Expectation Regarding Promptness Responding to Student Email

Promptness	Faculty (n=128)	Student (n=1,056)
Within a few hours	46 (35.9%)	226 (21.4%)
Within 12 hours	27 (21.1%)	299 (28.3%)
Within 24 hours	43 (33.6%)	446 (42.2%)
Within 1-2 days	12 (9.4%)	85 (8.0%)

As portrayed in Table 6, faculty and students were asked how often an instructor should communicate with an online class, beyond the communication associated with initially making a module or course content available.

Table 6. Frequency of Instructor Communication

Frequency	Faculty (n=128)	Student (n=1,054)
Several times a week	66 (51.6%)	500 (47.4%)
Weekly	60 (46.9%)	489 (46.4%)
Daily	2 (1.6%)	65 (6.2%)

The responses in Table 7 address the manner by which faculty and students prefer to send/receive announcements and course updates.

Table 7. Preference for Sending/Receiving Class Announcements and Updates

Preference	Faculty (n=128)	Student (n=1,055)
Email	113 (88.3%)	751 (71.2%)
Announcements in Course Management System	108 (88.4%)	221 (20.9%)
Text	14 (11.0%)	42 (4.0%)
Audio Messages	4 (5.0%)	10 (0.9%)
Other	12 (9.4%)	31 (2.9%)

Note: Respondents could select more than one item.

Table 8 presents the faculty and student responses as to the type of feedback instructors give and the type of feedback students expect to receive on their submitted assessments and assignments.

Table 8. Type of Feedback Preferred

Feedback Preference	Faculty (n=127)	Student (n=1,055)
Score and written specific feedback on individual items	59 (46.5%)	422 (40.0%)
Score and written overall feedback on the assignment	55 (43.3%)	519 (49.2%)
Just a grade/score is enough	4 (3.2%)	72 (6.8%)
Score and audio/video feedback on the assignment, items missed	9 (7.1%)	42 (4.0%)

The expectations that faculty and students have for grading and returning assignments is represented in Table 9.

Table 9. Time Frame for Grading and Returning Student Work

Time Frame	Faculty (n=127)	Student (n=1,054)
1-3 days	43 (33.9%)	500 (45.7%)
4-7 days	65 (51.2%)	489 (49.6%)
8-10 days	19 (15.0%)	65 (4.7%)

Learner-Content

The results in this section report on the aspects of online education that are associated with the course components most preferred by faculty and students. Their reactions comprise Table 10.

Table 10. Preferred Components of an Online Module

Content	Faculty (n=128)	Student (n=1,053)
Content, audio and visual messages from instructor	57 (44.5%)	611 (58.0%)
Content only	44 (34.4%)	255 (24.2%)
Content and audio messages	27 (21.1%)	187 (17.8%)

When asked about the use of voice tutorials to explain the content or technology being taught in a module, close to 58% of faculty and 54% of students expressed that such tools were helpful. Faculty and students conveyed their expectation about course pacing and the ability to work ahead in the modules beyond the current week. Approximately 54% of faculty and 75% of students were in favor of offering the option to work ahead, while both faculty (81%) and students (78%) expressed that new course content should be presented only once per week as opposed to multiple times throughout a week.

Regarding an instructor's use of technology in an online course, 45% of students wanted the course designed for tablet and smart devices, yet 53% of faculty were opposed to this idea. Neither faculty nor students indicated that the use of "cutting edge" technology was "very important" in an online class, with both groups choosing "somewhat important" instead (faculty 80%, students 66%).

Narrative Responses

Faculty members were asked to describe one aspect of a very successful online experience as well as one aspect of a very unsuccessful online experience they had encountered. Ninety-eight of the survey respondents provided such narrative commentary. The "successful" and "unsuccessful" aspects can be organized into several discrete groupings.

Positive Faculty Feedback Related to Technology Usage

Faculty shared many aspects of technology integration they perceived as being particularly valuable in the execution of their online courses. The tools that garnered the most responses were: WebEx, Google docs, video, audio, and VoiceThread. Some of their favorable comments included: “I like live guests on WebEx. The guest presents with PowerPoint and then the students can ask questions in real time. Very effective,” “Students continuing a discussion thread beyond what was expected for the course,” “multiple ways of delivering content (audio lectures, videos, interactive assignments, chapter quizzes, discussion boards, and journaling),” “simulation using A/V, DBs, and wiki,” and “synchronous course content delivery with student participation.”

In the student feedback, they made note of tutorials, audio and video lectures, Wimba, Tegrity, Voice Thread, and tools that addressed multiple learning styles: “There were instructional videos with audio lectures and PowerPoint slides. These are important to me as an audio/visual learner,” “I liked recorded lectures with a professor’s voice that can be listened to at my own leisure,” “My professor used video messages to make my first online experience more humanizing” “pre-recorded audio files of lectures that you could listen to at your own convenience,” “creating blogs,” and “using social media” (Huss & Eastep, 2013).

Positive Faculty Feedback Related to Learner-Learner Interaction

The positive responses that centered on interactions among students were connected to vehicles such as discussion boards (large and small); group projects; video projects; critiquing of peers; journals; and blogs: “When presented with engaging topics, students really utilize the discussion board and have great conversations,” “I had my students prepare a video presentation which was shared and judged by their fellow students,” “I have students evaluate others’ projects, blogs, etc.” and “I use small discussion groups that they are a part of for 6 weeks at a time.”

Students had offered positive comments such as, “Small groups help me get to know some of my classmates,” and “I like getting feedback on assignments from my peers before I turn something in” (Huss & Eastep, 2013).

Positive Faculty Feedback Related to Organization and Communication

Faculty members isolated several personal characteristics they felt were instrumental in bringing about positive online experiences. The prominent categories were: timeliness, clarity, communication, and ability to connect with students. One professor stated, “I reply to every student in the discussion boards throughout each week. I feel this helps me to individualize learning for each student and make connections to each one.” Said others: “Responding to students promptly is vital,” “Providing timely feedback to the students is paramount,” “When the schedule of assignments and due dates are clear and consistent, I find things run much more smoothly,” and “Students reported that my online class did not feel like an online class to them because of the frequency in which I communicated with them.” The topic of how material is presented to students was also raised: “Allowing for a self-paced classroom permits students to work at their optimum pace,” and “Students love choices for assignments.” Positive student feedback related to course organization and communication brought forth: “I like it when course content is posted the same day every week and all assignments are due on the same day each week,” “I think regular communication from the professor is important; it lets me know he/she is there to help us,” and “The professor sent out emails at the beginning of every week to remind us of our assignments” (Huss & Eastep, 2013).

Negative Faculty Feedback Related to Technology

Instructors identified aspects of technology usage and implementation that had led to unsuccessful experiences in their online classes. The complaints were generally related to browser issues, online testing, and use of tools: “I find that too much technology is a burden on both the students and the instructor,” “Various failure in Internet connection and reliability when students are taking online exams,” “There constantly seems to be an issue with accessing my audio lectures,” and “Tegrity recording---the technology is very cumbersome.” Students had offered comments such as, “The only technology used was regular Powerpoints and links to resources. It was a very boring class. I was teaching myself,” “failure to organize the navigation buttons,” and “The professor never used audio or video presentations---just .pdf files to explain difficult concepts” (Huss & Eastep, 2013).

Negative Faculty Feedback Related to Learner-Learner Interaction

Faculty related various instances where they had sought to create pertinent student-to-student interaction opportunities, but the results were disappointing: “I had group projects when the students had no interest in working together,” “I assigned team discussions and a team project...students had a terrible time with team members who would not participate,” “My discussion boards did not work well in my general studies courses. Students are not developed enough to handle online discussions,” and “There is a lack of truly getting to know my students and how they learn best...it’s challenging to know *how* they want to interact.” Other comments included: “I am always trying to pair students up to review each other’s writing each week – but they cannot seem to make the commitment to each other,” “I repeatedly try to have small groups lead weekly discussion boards and it never seems to work well,” “With discussion boards, students tend to copy other students instead of spending time formulating their own in-depth answers,” and “I really pushed small group research work, but my students said they took an online class for a reason, not to work with other classmates.”

The negative feedback from students regarding learner-learner interaction was directed in large part on the idea of working in groups: “One class put us in groups of 4-5. Really bad for an online class especially when most people take online classes for scheduling reasons,” “Group projects should never be done in an online class,” and “Group projects are a disaster in an online format” (Huss & Eastep, 2013).

Negative Feedback Related to Student Performance

Instructors disclosed a large number of comments that linked the performance of the students themselves to the unsuccessful outcomes that faculty experienced in their web-based courses. Many were related to inattention with submitting assignments when due: “It is very frustrating when students turn in assignments late and ‘don’t know’ the assignments are late,” “Students failing to complete assignments despite numerous reminders,” “Students waiting until the last minute to turn in materials,” “Students constantly overlooking of due dates and their lack of personal responsibility,” “Students waiting until the last minute to participate,” “Some students cannot manage the flexibility of online classes. They miss due dates for papers and exams,” and “When does the hand holding stop?” In a similar vein, faculty expressed negativity about students who neglect basic responsibilities: “The most unsuccessful aspect for me has been

getting students to read the syllabus,” and “Getting students to read their e-mail and course content is very exasperating for me.” One instructor made the following summation, “Some students take an online class for the wrong reasons. Consequently they do not engage sufficiently with the course and undermine class/group interaction.” Thus, a lack of student responsibility and preparation were seen to contribute to many of the negative experiences reported by faculty. Student data had uncovered similar disapproval, directed primarily at faculty: “totally uninvolved in the course,” “Sometimes it took several weeks to get grades,” “An unsuccessful online class that I have been a part of involves lack of involvement of the teacher,” “I felt completely disconnected from the instructor” and “The instructor could have been anybody. She did not react to our posts and contributed nothing beyond uploading the material once a week” (Huss & Eastep, 2013).

Discussion and Implications

The overall results from course instructors and students revealed a steadily growing accord between the producers and consumers of online education at our university. Such data, both numerical and narrative, can be used by our administrators, as well as individual professors who design and deliver web-based instruction, to recognize the general perceptions of our faculty body that creates and executes e-learning environments, and likewise appreciate the expectations of students who enroll in those classes. Our initial efforts to act as catalysts for change have included adaptations made within our own online teaching approach, the sharing of our findings with faculty within our own College, and the dissemination of data at a colleague-to-colleague faculty conference sponsored by the University.

Reasons for Teaching or Taking Online Courses

One of the most striking trends to emerge from the data was the low percentage of faculty members (approximately 20%) and students (approximately 8%) on our campus who engage with online classes because they prefer the web-based environment. Faculty comments included: “There was pressure to teach online, so I thought I would experiment,” “I do it for the convenience of the students,” and “This is the only way we deliver courses.” So, faculty and students appear to be choosing online because there is no other option available or strictly for convenience. In either case, the motivation is not rooted in a particular desire for or compatibility

with distance learning on its own merits. Such a finding can have implications on both sides of the computer screen. Faculty who create and deliver the courses may enter into the process under prepared or highly skeptical and encounter classes populated with students who are themselves overwhelmed with the technology or the self-reliant nature of an online experience.

To assist faculty who may fear losing their own personality in the online environment, we offered an on-campus session in which we introduced multiple tools, many incorporating audio and video that allow instructors to transfer their essential social characteristics (humor, delivery style, etc) into the web-based class. We noted how the interface of the course management system can also be customized to reflect the uniqueness of the professor. We surmised that some instructors simply underrate or sidestep the importance of their “digital personality” (Kelly, 2010) and do not enjoy their online course because of low confidence, their inattention to the affective aspects of online teaching, and/or a “flat” reaction from students. When instructors move past the awkwardness associated with hearing their own voice or seeing their own screen image, they often begin to realize they are not bound to limited modalities and can indeed project their persona into the course...or perhaps create a new one. Online instructors were also cautioned not to attempt to infuse an overwhelming amount of technologies into their courses in the very beginning, but rather to select one or two that seem particularly “safe” and implement those effectively to connect with students. Providing a biographical sketch of oneself, along with photographs and hobbies, or creating a web page are also strategies we imparted for establishing a web identity, a comfort zone, and a greater sense of ownership of the online experience.

Correspondence between Faculty and Students

Faculty and students showed agreement in their expectations regarding the response time for email correspondence, with instructors actually surpassing student expectations. Close to 36% of faculty indicated they strive to respond to student emails “within a few hours” after receipt, while only 21% of students anticipated such swiftness. Both groups (34% faculty, 42% students) concurred that responses within 24 hours were reasonable. One area of potential “disconnect” between faculty and students was found in the responses regarding a time frame for returning graded materials. More than half of instructors expressed that 4-7 days was their expectation, and 50% of students agreed. However, close to 46% (not a majority, but a rather sizeable representation) of students expected graded materials within a 1-3 day period. The

importance of communication in an online course cannot be understated because the need to provide feedback and support---and avoid student alienation—becomes vital as reinforced by researchers like Burton and Goldschmidt (2002) who declared that without faculty communication and presence online, student frustration and confusion develop quickly.

Correspondence between Students

The area with the most noticeable divide between faculty and students was found in the perceived importance of interaction with classmates in an online course. Less than 10% of student respondents considered such interaction to be “very important” while close to 52% of instructors placed the highest value on this aspect of distance learning. Perhaps even more telling, over 50% of students rated the interaction with their peers as “not important” compared with 12% of faculty. Relatedly, over 87% of instructors preferred large discussion boards as the primary tool for encouraging interaction between students. Students expressed much less enthusiasm for this mode of communication (57%) and selected small group discussion (69%, compared to only 38% faculty). Faculty members also showed a higher regard for group projects (36%) than did students (27%). Such findings were corroborated by Eske and Schulte (2012), yet would seem to run contrary to much of the literature that reports learner-learner interaction is the strongest predictor of student satisfaction in online environments (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Rodriguez Robles, 2006). It is possible that our faculty is either overestimating the desire that students have for “online community” or are simply projecting their own pedagogical preferences into their course design. Either way, faculty would appear to act with greater integrity to the CoI framework for developing social interdependence in a course than, perhaps, students anticipate or even desire.

Although instructors were certainly more inclined than students to prefer discussion boards and group projects in their online courses, they also expressed candor that such strategies are not always successful for them. Faculty mentioned “limited connection to and engagement with other students” and “student complaints about discussion boards.” Dennan, Darabi, and Smith (2007) argued that, although online instructors may think what students like may be other than what is good for them, they should not disregard what students claim to want as part of their online learning experience—if for no other reason than to maintain learner satisfaction. As an

action item, we urged instructors to consider alternatives to the standard discussion board format, such as those presented in Table 11.

Table 11. Alternative Tools for Learner-Learner Discussion

Program	Address	Brief Description
Disqus	https://disqus.com	Disqus allows for a discussion component to be added to any blog or website, with an interface suggestive of Facebook.
Edmodo	https://www.edmodo.com	Edmodo is set up much like Facebook but also allows for posting of assignments and a calendar function. It might be a good place for small groups to meet and discuss ideas and assignments.
Lino	http://linoit.com	Lino is a collaborate bulletin board that allows for text, images, videos and documents. This also is very mobile friendly with apps for iOS and Android devices. This would help with students who are mobile and use their phones and tablets for assignments.
Padlet	https://padlet.com	This tool is an online bulletin board that allows student to "pin" their own comments, images, videos, links and documents to a bulletin board. This can provide a place for discussions or an exchange of ideas that looks and feels different than a traditional discussion board.
Twitter	http://twitter.com	While most people think of Twitter as a tool for entertainment, it is used in education quite often to generate discussions. By using a # and a specific name, students can discuss course content among themselves.
Wiki	various	A wiki allows for a different kind of collaboration where all the students are not only working together and "discussing", but they are also building a body of work as a team. Many students like this and it was mentioned several times by faculty as a helpful tool.

Often, learner-learner interactivity can be bolstered by simply changing the conduit and giving online discussion another “look” and appeal. Whereas students might associate a standard discussion board with “busy work,” they may be more intrigued with a platform that is novel or that mimics social media, with which they are accustomed.

Other Findings

In their narrative responses, faculty had much to say about student characteristics and how procrastination and lack of initiative have led to unpleasant online experiences. Some instructors expressed disapproval about the apparent “hand holding” of students, and the need to remind them of dates, and, essentially, manage students’ time for them, which they perceive as contradictions to the independence many online students claim to seek. While it is true that most of these same complaints can be, and often are, leveled in traditional face-to-face classes, their impact may be more conspicuous in a distance learning environment due to the lack of spontaneous and casual interactions that frequently allow instructors to make announcements, provide motivation, and give gentle nudges during class or in the midst of before/after class encounters. The high percentage of students who choose online because of convenience or lack of options may also contribute to the phenomenon because of the lack of self-regulatory skills they bring to the process. Ironically, what allows some students to complete web-base courses successfully is when qualities of a face-to-face class are recreated and central elements of an online course are eliminated (Bair & Bair, 2011). Thus, requiring a limited number of on-campus meetings is one suggestion that may serve to create balance between structure and flexibility.

Limitations and Future Research

While 38% of online instructors across the University responded to the online questionnaire, there is the possibility that the group of faculty who participated was largely comprised of those who are more disposed toward answering email, providing prompt feedback, and responding to research surveys.

For future research, it could be advantageous to segregate the data by content areas in an effort to determine if faculty from certain disciplines are more online-friendly than others. The apparent divide between faculty and students on the inclusion of discussion boards and group projects could also benefit from further study. Admittedly, data in this study represent a single sample, but the numbers were not close and since these activities seem to be centerpieces in many online courses, it would be valuable to know if faculty support of or reliance on them is a detriment or a benefit to student learning and satisfaction.

Conclusion

This study brought a new layer of faculty data to the existing research on the attitudes of instructors toward online teaching and learning and, in total, pointed toward the notion of “refocusing on people” as Rosenberg (2001) asserted. While this study was conducted to improve our *own* practice and the practices of colleagues, those beyond our campus may find this faculty information useful for their own online endeavors in similar higher education settings. These data have allowed us to bring several recommendations to the University for inclusion in the institution’s strategic plan, which is currently undergoing revision: (1) exploring the need for teaching academies for distance learning throughout our Colleges as well as a consistent rubric for evaluating the overall quality of online courses; (2) designing more online courses or programs in collaboration with instructional designers so as to develop innovative hands-on simulations, animations, educational gaming, etc, to effectively engage students; and (3) implementing a process by which academic programs may appraise learner success and feedback regarding online program delivery and overall student experience. As a way of further evaluating the future impact of our research, we are looking to assess both alumni satisfaction with their online experience and the impact of faculty professional development opportunities on the use of promising practices within courses. We have been invited to share our findings with the University’s Information Technology Advisory Council, comprised of faculty, staff, and student representatives. We will continue to bring our focus on systematic inquiry, action, monitoring, and reflection to this research examination as we seek to forge greater connections between theory and practice in the web-based learning arena.

Throughout our institution, faculty members are becoming more deliberate about their actions as they seek to develop “teaching presence” that extends beyond the managerial and technical aspects of their interactions with students. Their responses would suggest an awareness of the value in responding quickly to student-initiated contact, providing an organized form of course management, and communicating regularly with the whole class. Clearly, the data reveal that teaching presence is a concept that must be evaluated on a course wide level, in that it encompasses so many aspects, both overt and subtle, that come together to produce what Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) refer to as a “binding element” (p.96). There is little doubt that online instructors must alter their role from being a visible center of attention in face-to-face classrooms to that of a designer and facilitator, which often involves a shift to the

sidelines (Bair & Bair, 2011). The prior student data presented in this study revealed that professors are making progress, but many are still viewed as being non-responsive and “absent” from their online courses. Such descriptions are consistent with the literature that emphasizes the importance of an instructor’s mindset in grasping the necessity of an interactive pedagogy when online courses are conceived and carried out. Comprehensive professional development in the areas of design, development, and delivery will assist instructors in gaining “fluency with teaching and learning with technology, not just with technology itself” (Jacobsen, Clifford, & Friesen, 2002, p. 44). At present, the university still has a large number of faculty who are reluctant and/or miscast online teachers and a large number of students who are reluctant and/or miscast online learners. As our distance education program moves forward, the ability of our instructors to join their own expectations with those of their students, coupled with continuing collaboration with those in administrative positions who sustain and support our web-based offerings, will go a long way in determining the future of the medium at our university and whether faculty and students are indeed on the same screen.

Appendix A

A Copy of the Essential Questions Asked of Faculty

<p>How would you describe your comfort level with technology ('1' being least comfortable, '10' being most comfortable)</p> <p>1-3 4-7 8-10</p>	<p>Why did you choose to teach an online class?</p> <p><i>-I was asked to teach online even though I prefer face-to-face</i> <i>-Convenience in my own schedule</i> <i>-I teach best in an online environment</i> <i>-None of the above</i></p>	<p>When teaching an online class, how quickly do you respond to emails?</p> <p><i>-Within a few hours</i> <i>-Within 12 hours</i> <i>-Within 24 hours</i> <i>-Within 1-2 days</i></p>
<p>For class updates how do you most often communicate with your online class?</p> <p><i>-Email</i> <i>-Announcement in Course</i> <i>-Management System</i> <i>-Text</i> <i>-Audio Message</i> <i>-Other</i></p>	<p>Have you ever used a video message or audio message to help connect with your online class?</p> <p><i>-Yes</i> <i>-No</i></p>	<p>Outside of making course content available, how often do you communicate with an online class (class reminders, updates, etc)?</p> <p><i>-Several times a week</i> <i>-Weekly</i> <i>-Daily</i></p>
<p>How do you typically give feedback on student work in your online class?</p> <p><i>-Score and written overall feedback on the assignment</i> <i>-Score and written specific feedback on individual items</i> <i>-Just a grade/score is enough</i> <i>-Score and audio/video feedback on the assignment and items missed</i></p>	<p>What is your typical time frame for assignments/exams to be graded and scores posted back to the students?</p> <p><i>-Within 1-3 days</i> <i>-Within 4-7 days</i> <i>-Within 8-10 days</i></p>	<p>What do you typically include in an online learning module?</p> <p><i>-Content/Audio and video messages from instructor</i> <i>-Content only</i> <i>-Content and audio messages</i></p>
<p>In terms of pacing an online course, how often do you make new content available?</p> <p><i>-More than once per week</i> <i>-Weekly</i> <i>-Every 2 weeks</i></p>	<p>As an online instructor, do you allow for the option to work ahead past the current week of material?</p> <p><i>-Yes</i> <i>-No</i></p>	<p>Do you use tutorials (voice-narrated how-to videos) to help the student better understand the technology or the content being taught?</p> <p><i>-Yes</i> <i>-No</i></p>
<p>Do you design your course with the possibility that students may use tablets/Ipads, etc?</p> <p><i>-Yes</i> <i>-No</i></p>	<p>How important is it to you that your online course use cutting edge technology?</p> <p><i>-Very important</i> <i>-Somewhat important</i> <i>-Not very important</i> <i>-Not important at all</i></p>	<p>How important is it to you that your students interact with their classmates on a regular basis in an online course?</p> <p><i>-Very important</i> <i>-Somewhat important</i> <i>-Not very important</i> <i>-Not important at all</i></p>
<p>In an online class, what kind of tools do you use with students to help them interact with classmates?</p> <p><i>-Small group discussion board</i> <i>-Large class discussion board</i> <i>-Small group projects</i> <i>-Voice generated discussions</i> <i>-Video generated discussions</i> <i>-Other</i></p>	<p>Describe for us one aspect of a very successful online class that you have experienced.</p>	<p>Describe for us one aspect of an unsuccessful online class that you have experienced</p>

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