Course/Instructor Evaluation: Perspectives of Part-Time Graduate Students

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Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Education

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St. Catharines, Ontario

Abstract

This study explored 6 part-time graduate students' perspectives on course/instructor evaluation. The purpose was to explore whether a link exists between the evaluation for course and instructors as contained in the Faculty of Education course/instructor evaluation form and the needs of part-time students enrolled in that program. The literature review provided contextual information concerning the 3 main subject areas based upon which the research questions were designed: learner needs in the context of part-time graduate students, course/instructor evaluation, and the potential lack of congruency between the 2. Using a semistructured interview process, participants identified criteria important or relevant to the evaluation process and incongruent with the course/instructor evaluation form. A qualitative research methodology using a grounded theory approach contributed to the theory on the nature of course evaluation instruments in a graduate program and addressed the notion of where power was situated within the evaluation process.

Findings suggested that the concepts of relevance and the instructor's role that participants identified as important in their graduate learning experience were congruent with what they considered important components of the course/instructor evaluation form. Participants noted a lack of congruency between their expectations of a quality graduate learning experience and the format, content, intent, and timing of the evaluation process. The study confirmed that students did want a voice in the evaluation of their learning experience at both the course and program levels.

Acknowledgements

I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with a number of professors who have challenged me to look at evaluation from a number of different perspectives and have been open and responsive to my comments and concerns with the manner in which evaluations are utilized in the Master of Education program. Of particular note has been the support and encouragement of Denise Paquette-Frenette.

This journey has been an amazing experience for me and one in which I have received some incredible support and counsel from friends and family alike. I have particularly appreciated the support and encouragement of my "learning buddies," Sharon and Chrisoula, with whom I shared this road to successful completion of our Masters' programs. The counsel, advice, and motivational talks from Leanne, Buffy, and Monica have made the journey much easier for me.

Finally, to my family, I have appreciated your constant support and your unwavering belief in me. To have my mom, my husband, and my two beautiful daughters in the audience when I walk across the stage to receive my degree will remain one of the high points in my life.

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CHAPTER ONE: CONTEXT OF INQUIRY

The purpose of this research was to determine whether there is a link between what part-time Master of Education students consider to be important or relevant to them in their evaluation of the learning they experienced through courses they have taken and the evaluation criteria contained in the "course/instructor" evaluation forms distributed at the end of each course. As the content of those evaluation forms often reflects elements related to both the performance of the instructor and the course content itself, the dual term "course/instructor" evaluation has been utilized for the purposes of this study. By inquiring into the criteria for course or instructor satisfaction and comparing those criteria to the evaluation instrument, I identified the specific elements which reflected what part-time students considered important or relevant criteria to the evaluation process or, alternatively, lacked congruency with them.

Background of the Problem

Course/instructor evaluation is an integral part of the postsecondary education process (Beran, Violato, Kline, & Frideres, 2005; Centra, 1979; Marsh & Dunkin, 1993). Decisions are made by the university or college concerning faculty tenure, promotion, and professional development based in part on the information obtained from these evaluations. Courses are also amended, revised, or eliminated on the basis of a variety of inputs, not the least of which is student feedback obtained through the course/instructor evaluation form completed at the end of each course (Chen, Hoshower, & Leon, 2003). Instructional strategies and methods of assessment are also elements which may undergo revision following student feedback (Althouse, Stritter, Strong, & Mattern, 1998; Centra).

A southern Ontario university (identified in this study as The University)

education program, on which the research is based, has two major categories of learners–those involved in school-based settings and those coming from other settings such as business, health, government, and colleges. Within the program itself, students are able to attend the university on either a part-time or full-time basis. In the case of part-time students, many are employed on a full-time or part-time basis and may be enrolled in the program for the purposes of augmenting or changing their knowledge and skills through successful completion of their Master of Education degree. It appears to me that the course/instructor evaluation form has been developed with full-time students in mind. As the needs, interests, and challenges facing part-time students may be different than those of students attending on a full-time basis, I believe that the evaluation criteria for course/instructor evaluations may not reflect the needs of part-time students.

This study builds on the October 2000 study conducted by The University Centre for Teaching, Learning and Educational Technologies (CTLET) to examine the practice of course evaluations. The report's authors recommended that the university address the purpose of course evaluations to determine if they should be used for summative or formative reasons. That report provided a number of recommendations in support of each type of evaluation. It also highlighted the need to delineate and define the differences between summative and formative evaluations, identify clear goals for each type of evaluation including the intended use of each, and articulate the postevaluation protocols associated specifically with the summative evaluation process.

Defining summative evaluation as one that is "aimed at making administrative decisions such as merit pay increases, teaching assignments and tenure/promotion reviews" (Lawall, 1977), the report recommended that a university-wide standardized

questionnaire be developed that poses the specific questions upon which the university intends to base its evaluation. The results of a summative evaluation would be utilized by the university to make administrative decisions concerning faculty members' advancement.

The Centre for Teaching, Learning and Educational Technologies report (The Univerity, 2000) considered formative evaluations to be essential in the context of teaching, in that information gathered from the evaluation process could be used to improve instruction. However, the report's authors noted that improvements made as a result of formative evaluations could also have a positive impact on the summative evaluation process and recommended that the timing, content, and format of formative evaluation should remain within the control of the instructor. The report recommended that instructors be encouraged to work with the Centre for Teaching and Learning in the development of formative evaluation instruments to be utilized throughout the semester. The report also advocated that a representative of the Centre be seconded as a member of the University Promotions and Tenure Committee to assist that committee in interpreting information obtained through the formative evaluation process.

Within the context of the Faculty of Education, the authors observed that the type of data collected at the end of each course contained both qualitative and quantitative assessments and that a single form serves as both summative and formative evaluation. Although the authors did not specify what parts of the form address formative or summative evaluation, they noted that formative evaluation did not take place during a course at the graduate or undergraduate level. The lack of separation between formative and summative evaluation processes was seen to be a weakness in the existing

course/instructor evaluation form.

This study also builds on a recent unpublished Master's thesis entitled "*What Matters? The Full-time Graduate Students' Perception of Teacher Effectiveness*" (Xiaojun Shi, 2005). The research explored how 8 university full-time Master of Education students characterized effective and ineffective teachers and described the dimensions of teacher effectiveness identified by the students to be of most importance. The study concluded that teacher effectiveness was essential to graduate learners as it instilled confidence, provided direction designed to help students achieve their learning goals, and stimulated student motivation and enthusiasm to learn. Seven major characteristics or dimensions of teacher effectiveness were identified as a result of the study: good command of subject matter, good presentation skills, challenging and motivating students, rapport with students, effective learning environment, balanced course demands, as well as beneficial assessment and feedback. In contrast, it noted that given the different backgrounds, experiences, cultures, interests, and learning styles of students, there was no universal consensus on the definition or measure of teacher effectiveness from a graduate student's perspective at The University.

From these two studies, it would appear that there may be a concern with the nature and content of the existing course/instructor evaluation form and its intended purpose as a formative or summative tool. Although a number of dimensions of teacher effectiveness were identified by graduate students, how that effectiveness could be defined and subsequently measured remained unclear.

Statement of the Problem Situation

The University's Faculty of Education program, like those of most postsecondary

institutions, distributes a course/instructor evaluation form at the end of each course to attending students. The form, which lists a number of statements with a corresponding Likert scale, also provides additional space for narrative comments. It includes a number of different areas for assessment related to both course content and organization and instructor performance. A copy of the evaluation form is in Appendix A. Specifically, the form asks students to evaluate the course itself, including course design, objectives, content, as well as an assessment of participant learning related to the objectives established. It also requires the student to assess the performance of the instructor, including flexibility, fairness in assessment, use of teaching strategies, and availability for feedback. The problems with the current form are that it contains elements of both summative and formative evaluation criteria; the statements upon which the assessments are based lack clarity; and it discourages narrative feedback appropriate to specific elements of the evaluation, as it invites student comments only at the end of the form.

Dressel's description of student evaluation can be applied to the current M.Ed. evaluation form. Evaluation can be considered "an inaccurate report of an inaccurate judgement by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite material" (Dressel, cited in Beaman, 1998, p. 50). Course/instructor evaluation involves a value judgment by the student on the performance of the instructor and/or on satisfaction with the course. As the elements contained in the evaluation instrument are not clearly defined and may not be congruent with what the student considers to be important or relevant, the results of that evaluation could be considered problematic.

More than 80% of the 456 graduate students enrolled in the Master of Education

program at The University are part-time students (The University, 2007). Research has shown (Choy & Cataldi, 2006; Polson, 2003) that adults choosing to attend graduate programs on a part-time basis do so primarily because they are employed on a full- or part-time basis. The reasons for attending graduate programs vary. Some students attend in order to increase their skills and knowledge, while others wish to change careers or to develop further in their present career. Consequently, the potential exists for these adult learners to place importance on specific needs which may or may not be congruent with the evaluation criteria reflected in the graduate level course/instructor evaluation instrument which is distributed at the end of each course. The focus of this research was to examine whether the criteria reflected in the course/instructor evaluation form are congruent with the criteria by which part-time graduate students assess effective performance.

Needs in the context of this research refers to the preferences of graduate students concerning objective or tangible elements of the teaching and learning process, such as course design, content and objectives, and organization and assessment. Pratt (1998) refers to these elements as surface ("duty-based") approaches to evaluation. "Deep approaches" to evaluation (Pratt) are concerned with the personal qualities of the instructor as reflected in the teaching and learning experience. These would include, among other characteristics, teaching strategies, instructor ability to engage the students, respect and interest demonstrated by the instructor, flexibility, and timeliness of feedback. In the latter instance, reflection on the connection between the instructor's beliefs and their translation into action is central to the evaluation. This study explored both surface and deep aspects from the perspective of the part-time graduate student.

As a researcher, I have been involved in the field of evaluation for over 10 years in my professional capacity as adjudicator, investigator, and mediator with the federal government. I have a keen interest in the field but also have some concerns, from the perspective of a student involved in the course/instructor evaluation process, that the evaluation instruments do not reflect the criteria which I believe may be relevant to the evaluation of instructors and the courses themselves. Rather, it appears that the evaluation form has been developed to cover a broad spectrum of criteria relevant to both teaching and learning without necessarily considering whether those criteria are applicable to the individuals completing the evaluation. The fact that others within the program have shared similar concerns with me leads me to believe that there may be some opportunities to identify areas where there is a lack of congruence between what part-time students consider to be important or relevant in the assessment of the learning experience and the criteria for evaluation established by the department. Whether the same concerns expressed by part-time students are reflective of the concerns of full-time students remains outside the scope of this particular study. I did not have the time to conduct a thoughtful evaluation of this issue; rather, I proposed to conduct a series of in-depth interviews designed to allow participants attending the Master of Education program on a part-time basis to give voice to their perspective of the course/instructor evaluation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to establish whether a link exists between the evaluation criteria for course and instructors in The University's Master of Education program as contained in the current Faculty of Education course/instructor evaluation forms and the needs of part-time students enrolled in that program. As many part-time

students are members of the workforce, their evaluation criteria may differ from those of students enrolled on a full-time basis. Consequently, there existed the potential that the course/instructor evaluation forms may not reflect criteria which were congruent with their perceptions of instructor or course effectiveness.

The main question addressed in this study is whether the content of the Faculty of Education course/instructor evaluation form addresses criteria which are relevant to what part-time Master of Education students consider to be important in their evaluation of the learning experience. The study explored the elements which characterized a course that students considered to be of value to their learning or one that they particularly enjoyed, in contrast to the elements which characterized a course that provided the opposite experience. Through the identification of the relevant characteristics and a comparison with the existing course/instructor evaluation form, I sought an understanding of the extent to which the content of the course/instructor evaluation form reflected the criteria that part-time graduate students considered important.

Theoretical Framework

The framework underlying this study was closely related to the research methodology I chose, which takes a participatory and collaborative approach to the identification of emerging themes using grounded theory. In addition, the methodology I selected requires a reflection on and analysis of the themes. This analysis was done through a critical theoretical perspective. By considering the themes that emerged from my participants' discussions concerning course/instructor evaluation through the lens described by Pratt (1998) as social reform, issues of power (where it is, how it is reflected) provided an opportunity to question, explore, and recommend change.

Brookfield argues that a critical theory perspective of adult learning "studies the systems and forces that shape adults' lives and oppose adults' attempts to challenge ideology, recognize hegemony, unmask power, defend the lifeworld, and develop agency" (2005, p. 2). He further argues that through critical theory one can

> understand adult education as a political process in which certain interests and agendas are always pursued at the expense of others, in which curriculum inevitably promotes content as "better" than some other, and in which evaluation is an exercise of the power by some to judge the efforts of others. (p. 32)

Scott (1998) suggests that what is important to the discussion of critical theory is the concept of power and empowerment. She argues that central to the critique of adult education is analysis and dialogue, which in turn lead to reflection and transformation (Scott). Within a critical paradigm, human knowledge is viewed as being distorted by power. It is incumbent upon us to understand from what and from where the influence of power is being initiated (Plumb & Welton, 2001). Freire contends that adult education is not neutral but is reflective of the power held by the teacher and the learner within the specific context in which they are engaged (Magro, 2001). A similar argument is made by Apple, who suggests that the social context in which we are situated is never neutral (Plumb & Welton). In other words, the critical perspective requires a consideration of where power is situated, the impact of that power on others, and an analysis of whose interests are being served by the wielding or receiving of that power.

Analyzing through a critical perspective includes making an assessment of the issue which is being considered and subsequently engaging in a level of critical reflection (Brookfield, 1995) on the impacts of that assessment on the concept of power. Boud and

Walker suggest that our individual "personal foundation of experience" (Plumb & Welton, 2001) shapes the perception by which we assess new experiences. By remaining aware of or attuned to the power dynamic within a particular context, we are able to understand what we do or why we react in a particular manner and consequently take appropriate action (the concept of "praxis").

A significant amount of discussion has surrounded the issue of theoretical framework in the context of qualitative research. Anfara and Mertz (2006) argue that there are three schools of thought that reflect whether it is reasonable for researchers to advance a theoretical framework which shapes their work. Some theorists suggest that theory has little or no place (Anfara & Mertz; Best & Kahn, 2003; Gay & Airasian, 2003). Others maintain that the methodology chosen to conduct the research frames the qualitative research theory (Anfara & Mertz: Creswell, 2005; Patton, 1990). Still others claim that qualitative research theory is not limited to, but is broader and deeper than, the research methodology chosen (Anfara & Mertz, 2006).

Within the context of a grounded theory approach, theory is developed through the analysis of data and the identification of emerging patterns and themes (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2005). However, I would argue that it is difficult to separate emerging patterns and themes from one's own view or conceptual framework which, in some way, shapes the manner in which the research is conceptualized, the study is conducted, and the data are analyzed (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990; Schram, 2003;Westhues, Cadell, Karabanow, Maxwell, & Sanchez, 1999). That being said, the critical perspective allowed me to question whatever theory was inductively developed or built from the emergent data. Merriam (2001) looks at critical theory as an opportunity for us to consider our

assumptions and question our practices in adult education. Scott (1998) characterizes this practice as "critique," where "one critically reflects in dialogue with others" (p. 103). Pratt (1998) expands that notion when he clarifies that although the critical perspective may ultimately focus on the need for social change, its immediate goal "is to get people to look more closely at what they know and examine more carefully their common sense understandings about the content" (p. 251).

The notion of power is a key aspect within the critical theoretical framework (Magro, 2001; Scott, 1998). It may be somewhat difficult to isolate power, as one could consider that it lies with the organization responsible for the creation of the course/instructor evaluation instrument or, conversely, that it lies with the individuals responsible for providing the evaluation itself (the students). Alternatively, it could rest with those individuals responsible for interpreting the information (ratings and narrative comments) provided.

My initial personal view of the course/instructor evaluation instrument provided to Master of Education students suggested to me that there are some concerns with how the instrument meets or does not meet my needs and interests as a part-time student. Consequently, the selection of a critical theoretical perspective has dictated to some extent the manner in which this research has been conceptualized, planned, and was ultimately conducted. Is my perspective neutral? On one hand, one could argue that, once declared, it is difficult to describe one's approach as being neutral. However, in my opinion, by conducting this research using a grounded theory approach, the opportunity existed to neutralize, or at least minimize, my own personal views or perceptions, as the themes which emerged from the data must reflect the perspectives of the research subjects. If my

views did not reflect these perspectives, they were not grounded in the data, and therefore it would be reasonable to infer that there was a flaw in the manner of the execution of the research. That does not say that I was unable to offer my own critique of the data that emerged, but rather that the perspective from which that critique was based had to be consistently tied to the themes and subthemes identified by the participants themselves and had to deal with the issue of power.

Rationale for the Study

Although a significant amount of research has been conducted on the use and effectiveness of student input into the evaluation process conducted for courses/instructors (Aleomoni, 1987; Centra, 1979; Seldin, 1984), the studies do not differentiate between the needs and interests of full-time students and those of part-time postsecondary students. In addition, studies do not focus on the differences between the needs of adult learners attending a postsecondary institution in a graduate program on a part-time basis and those attending on a full-time basis. A more detailed review of current research on student input to the evaluation process is covered in the literature review contained in Chapter Two.

Given that in excess of 80% of students attending the Master of Education program at The University attend on a part-time basis, a determination of the relevance of the evaluation instruments should be of interest to the department, particularly as comments received on the evaluations could be used in the assessment of faculty performance, the revision of curriculum, or decisions regarding tenure or professional competence. In addition, part-time Master of Education students comprise the largest graduate student population within the university. The results should provide an additional

perspective on the dimensions of teacher effectiveness from a graduate student's perspective which were interpreted in an earlier study conducted at the Master's level at the university in 2005 (Xiaojun Shi, 2005), as that study focussed on the full-time graduate student.

Importance of Study

The findings of this research could contribute to the understanding of the value of student feedback to the evaluation process as well as the research concerning the nature and content of evaluation instruments themselves. Regardless of the specific results of the study concerning part-time students, the identification of specific themes may help The University assess the relevance of the existing evaluation instrument to the individuals providing the feedback. In that way, this study may build on the previous study conducted in 2000 which made a number of recommendations concerning the need to separate summative evaluation processes from formative evaluations. Further, some results may suggest changes which could be incorporated into a revised evaluation instrument, should the Faculty consider that to be an appropriate action to take. Finally, the results of this analysis could be applicable to other graduate programs where there are a high number of part-time graduate students.

From a theoretical perspective, this study may contribute to the debate on the value of student participation in the evaluation of courses and instructors (Aleomoni, 1987; Beran et al., 2005; Centra, 1979). It may offer some insights into what is important to a part-time graduate student who attends classes while engaged in full- or part-time employment (Polson, 2003; Thompson & Foth, 2003). It may also provide some clarification of the notion of power within the context of the evaluation process itself,

where it is situated, and what effect it may have on the perspective of the part-time student (Plumb & Welton, 2001: Scott, 1998).

In summary, the results of this research could further the discussion on how the structure and content of course/instructor evaluation reflect what students consider to be important or relevant to the learning process, particularly those attending on a part-time basis. It holds the potential of shifting the format of the course/instructor evaluation form in order to respond to the various purposes served by the evaluation instrument. It may also provide a clearer understanding of the individual institution's perspectives inherent in the evaluation itself. In addition, there is a potential for the identification of a completely different set of evaluation criteria depending on the full-time or part-time status of students attending the course.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The scope of this research was circumscribed by the eligibility criteria, timing, and availability of participants for the project. First, the research was conducted within one graduate program in a university in southern Ontario. The study encompassed the three separate locations in which graduate courses are offered including the main campus and two satellite locations in the southern ontario area.

Document Outline

While Chapter One provides the conceptual framework and background of this study, the following chapters provide a more detailed discussion of the literature, methodology, findings, analysis, and discussion of possible implications of this research. Chapter Two canvasses the related research literature and theory associated with evaluation. It includes sections on the adult learner as well as a discussion of theories

concerning evaluation instruments and their perceived value, challenges, and weaknesses. Chapter Three provides a description of the research design, methodology, and data collection and analysis in support of the grounded theory approach that forms the basis of this research. Included in Chapter Three is a discussion of researcher positionality, methodological assumptions, and ethical considerations associated with this study. Chapter Four provides a discussion of the findings of the research including detailed information on the concepts and themes that emerged from the data collection, processing, and analysis. The major themes are: (a) clarifying the relevance, purpose, and intent of the evaluation process; (b) reorganizing the form's structure; (c) highlighting the role of the instructor; and (d) broadening the evaluation process. Finally, Chapter Five provides a summary of the research conducted, with particular emphasis on the theoretical and practical implications of the findings, and includes recommendations concerning the evaluation process in the Master of Education program.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this research was to determine whether there is a link between what part-time Master of Education students consider to be important or relevant to them in their evaluation of the learning they experienced through courses they have taken and the evaluation criteria contained in the "course/instructor" evaluation forms distributed at the end of each course. As the content of those evaluation forms often reflects elements related to both the performance of the instructor and the course content itself, the dual term "course/instructor" evaluation has been utilized for the purposes of this study. By inquiring into the criteria for course or instructor satisfaction and comparing those criteria to the evaluation instrument, I identified the specific elements which reflected what part-time students considered important or relevant criteria to the evaluation process or, alternatively, lacked congruency with them.

As the focus of this research pertains to instructor/course evaluation by part-time students within a Master of Education program, the literature review has been divided into three parts. The first section deals with adult learners, their characteristics, and learning needs and reviews research studies concerning the characteristics of students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The second section considers evaluation in the context of instructor/course evaluation in a postsecondary setting, and the third section explores how instructors perceive the value of evaluation. The final section includes a brief discussion of Pratt's concept of congruency between evaluation and an instructor's perspective on teaching (Pratt, 1998).

The Adult Learner

As stated in Chapter One, the focus of this research is to determine whether the needs of part-time graduate students are congruent with the assessment criteria contained in the course/instructor evaluation form distributed at the end of each course. As a high percentage of students enrolled in the Master of Education program are part-time students, it appeared reasonable to consider what are the characteristics of part-time students in order to understand what impact those characteristics have on what the learners consider to be either important or of relevance to them in the evaluation process.

Adult learning theory came to the forefront in the 20th century with Malcolm Knowles's definition of andragogy as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1980, p. 30). Pratt (1998) notes that the definition of andragogy is built on two distinct "critical, defining elements: First, a conception of learners as self-directed and autonomous; and second, a conception of the role of teacher as facilitator of adult learning rather than presenter of content" (p. 12). However, the concept of self-directedness is not without its detractors. Dorothy MacKeracher describes the controversy associated with self-directedness as either a characteristic of adult learners or as an approach to adult learning to be "probably the most discussed and debated issue in adult education" (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 45). She notes that self-direction can be understood in one of three ways: (a) as a trait or characteristic with which one is born, (b) as an acquired quality developing naturally as one ages, and/or (c) as a learned characteristic (MacKeracher). Merriam (2001) suggests that in order to understand the concept of self-directed learning we need to look at a number of issues including: how individuals move from novice to expert both in knowledge and in learning strategies; how adults remain

self-directed over time; how issues of power affect self-directed learning in a formal setting; and the impact that a self-directed learner has on instructional planning and learning activities. Mezirow built on this concept through the introduction of transformative learning theory, which he defined as

> the process by which we transform our taken for granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 7-8)

Ross-Gordon (2003) considers the concepts of andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformational learning as frameworks for understanding adult development. She notes that research on adult learners' perceptions of effective teaching has demonstrated that adult learners prefer learner-centred instruction and that they are disappointed when they find it is teacher centred in an academic environment. Ross-Gordon suggests that the dichotomy could be related to the multiple roles adults juggle and the gap between experiential knowledge and knowledge gained within the academic. As the majority of part-time graduate students juggle the demands that work, school, and family place on their time, there may be some connections between what part-time graduate students consider important or relevant criteria to the evaluation process and the position advanced by Ross-Gordon.

It would appear from the literature that adult learners come to the learning process with a perspective gained through experience both within and outside of the learning context. Patricia Cranton describes adult learners as individuals who most often choose to

become involved in a learning situation (Cranton), although others argue that adults are thrust into a learning situation because of changes in the labour market (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001) or the need for career or personal development (Hadfield, 2003; Thompson & Foth, 2003). Some authors believe that adults possess concrete, immediate goals for learning (Imel, 1995; Pratt, 1998). They can be more reluctant to change their values, opinion, or behaviours, most likely because they come to the learning process from a variety of life experiences (Cranton, 2000). MacKeracher (1996b; 2004) also considers past experience as a lens through which adult learners perceive their learning journey. Merriam and Caffarella (1991) provide a detailed analysis of the characteristics of adult learners which includes such elements as self-directed behaviour, a preference for meaningful, relevant, and applicable learning opportunities, and the importance of incorporating previous experience into the learning process. Bos (2001) notes that adult students have a greater focus on career and personal sense of accountability than younger students who may be experiencing their first opportunity for independence. He further suggests that the adult learner "expects to have a role in determining learning conditions" (p. 177) and comments that course evaluations are important to adult learners who "need to be able to express their opinions on their experience" (p. 181). Brookfield describes adult learners as self-directed, who view the learning process as transforming knowledge rather than forming new knowledge (Brookfield, 1995). He later questions this concept of self-directedness, suggesting that it reflects a more self-centred approach to education and ignores "the existence of common interests and interdependence in favour of an obsessive focus on the self" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 84). Chonavec highlights the contradictions with the concept of self-directedness, suggesting that that in the absence of

a clearly understood and accepted definition of the concept, she wonders if the term itself is meaningless (1998).

The characteristics of adult learners are of some significance in this research, as an understanding of those characteristics assisted in framing the questions for data collection and analysis. As the selection of participants is based on their status as part-time students, an additional criterion could also be considered to be relevant to these participants, that of value for money (Hadfield, 2003; Polson, 2003). Looking at the student as a consumer of a product and the evaluation form as a vehicle to assess customer satisfaction (Martensson, 1997; Thompson & Foth, 2003) is an additional lens through which adult learners' participation in the evaluation process can also be viewed.

In summary, the literature suggests that the characteristics of adult learners indicate that they place a high value on the creation of a positive learning atmosphere, the use of diverse instructional techniques, and their perception of instructor dedication to teaching (Imel, 1995). In general, adult learners are described as self-motivated, with some degree of self-directedness, are focussed on specific or immediate goals (Brookfield, 1986; Cranton, 2000; MacKeracher, 1996a; 2004; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). They can also be anxious within the educational setting because of the challenge to their existing beliefs, behaviours, values, or opinions which may occur as a result of the learning process (Cranton). Life experience, including work experience, plays a significant part in adult learning and is most likely viewed as important and valuable by the part-time graduate students who were involved in this study. The additional dimension of juggling work, school, and life demands may provide other insights into whether course/instructor evaluation is congruent with the needs of part-time graduate

students.

Course/Instructor Evaluations in Postsecondary Settings

Course/instructor evaluation remains a topic of interest to both instructors and the educational institutions which utilize the information gathered through the evaluations to make decisions or recommendations concerning program delivery and instructor performance. It is a topic that has been studied from a variety of different perspectives, and its value appears to be the subject of some debate. This portion of the literature review looks at evaluation focussing on a number of different variables. I will define what it is, what it can be used for, and how different characteristics (of the evaluators as well as those being evaluated) can affect the evaluation results.

Fenwick and Parsons (2000) state that evaluation is "an integral part of learning" (p. 11) and provide nine purposes of evaluation which must be considered within the context of the program and/or institution in which the learning takes place. For the purposes of this study, the four key reasons for evaluation include: the assessment of teaching methods, the opportunity to review and revise the instructor's program plan, the need to provide information for other stakeholders (the university, potential students), and the ability to determine learner satisfaction (Fenwick & Parsons).

Evaluation of instructor performance remains part of the assessment process conducted within the postsecondary environment (Beran et al., 2005). The intent of the evaluation process is to determine faculty effectiveness for the purposes of promotion or tenure and to assess performance, whether it is in the context of teaching, research, or other activities in which the individual is engaged (Centra, 1979). Faculty members are evaluated on the basis of a number of criteria including course evaluations completed by

students, usually on the last day of class. Centra argues that effective faculty evaluation should consist of a variety of approaches not limited to student feedback. Other forms of evaluation could include the formal course/instructor evaluation form, ongoing opportunities for informal comments through dialogue with students, peer evaluation, and individual self-reflection.

Much of the research concerning evaluation has focussed on full-time undergraduate students at both the university and college level. Although the majority of the studies took place in a postsecondary environment outside of Canada, three studies have focussed particularly on Canadian universities (Abrami & Mizener, 1983; Beran & Violato, 2005; Schlenker & McKinnon, 1994). In the 1983 study conducted at McGill University with 345 undergraduate students, Abrami and Mizener assessed whether similarity in attitude between students and instructors affected the evaluations of instructors. They concluded that when evaluations are utilized to make gross distinctions in performance (for example the differences between the criteria of outstanding, acceptable, and poor ratings), student/instructor attitude similarity was of minimum importance. Schlenker and McKinnon noted in their study of undergraduate students conducted at a Canadian university that course level appeared to be a consistent variable in the assessment of instructor performance. There was a higher satisfaction level with instructor performance as the level of the course increased (Schlenker & McKinnon). Although the findings may be somewhat related to differences in class size, the authors also suggested that students who had been exposed to a variety of teaching styles might better appreciate the complexities of different classroom experiences and consequently be more discerning in their evaluation of those experiences.

Building on the findings by Schlenker and McKinnon (1994), a more recent Canadian study by Beran and Violato (2005) determined that student evaluation was most concerned with instruction and teacher behaviour. This quantitative research study, which included both graduate and undergraduate students, found that differences in ratings could be tied to course format, with courses in social sciences receiving higher ratings than those in natural sciences. The study confirmed the findings of research conducted by Saroyan and Amundsen (2001), who considered the evaluations completed by graduate students to be more reliable than those of undergraduate students. The authors noted that graduate students had more experience with different instructors; they tended to be more discerning in their comments. However, Beran and Violato also observed that the primary concerns of students in the evaluation of course/instructor performance related to the assessment of instruction, while lesser emphasis was placed on course planning and assessment of student learning.

Several studies have turned their attention to adult learners at the graduate level in a university or U.S. college setting (Donaldson, Flannery, & Ross-Gordon, 1993; Young, Delli, & Johnson, 1999). Donaldson et al. identified four characteristics of significance to graduate students which were not considered as important for students at the undergraduate level. They include the creation of a comfortable learning atmosphere, the instructor's use of a variety of instructional techniques, the adaptability of the instructor to diverse needs, and the instructor's dedication to teaching (Imel, 1995). They further observed that when teaching adults "the issue is not to continue to promote an either/or approach to teaching expectations of adults, but rather to concentrate on the particular attributes which adults consistently select as important for effective teaching" (Imel). A

study of graduate students in the Faculty of Education of a midwestern American university found that regardless of the expressed purpose for which the evaluations were to be used (formative or summative), students' evaluations of faculty remained consistent (Young et al.).

Observations have been made in at least two studies that graduate students demonstrate a more reliable assessment of quality of both the course and the instructor than the evaluations completed by undergraduate students (Huang, 1995; Schlenker & McKinnon, 1994). Using generalizability theory, a single evaluation form was examined across three levels of courses (734 students in undergraduate, intermediate, and graduate levels in a large midwestern American university). The findings indicated that evaluations completed by graduate students were more reliable, and consequently their results more generalizable across students (Huang). In addition, there is a negative corelation of the effect of class size to overall evaluation; that is, the smaller the class size, the higher the evaluation (Mateo & Fernandez, 1996). As graduate classes tend to be smaller in size than undergraduate classes, the findings in the Mateo and Fernandez study would seem to confirm the conclusions reached in previous studies (Huang; Schlenker & McKinnon).

A number of studies have been conducted on how student ratings can be used by the instructor or the organization to improve instructor performance (Chen et al., 2003; P. Cohen & Mays, 1981; Diamond, 2004; Stevens, 1987; Van Ast & Field, 2005; Wilson, 1999). Many of these studies have focussed on the differences between summative and formative evaluation. The latter provides an opportunity for feedback at a point normally midway during the course, whereas the former provides feedback after the course has been completed.

Chen et al. (2003) argue that instructor evaluations are primarily used to address teaching improvements, with a secondary use being made of the evaluations for improvements in course content and format. Young et al. (1999) outline two purposes for the evaluation process, formative and summative: The former offers an opportunity for the instructor to reshape course content or amend instructional strategies, whereas the latter provides information upon which personnel decisions are made with respect to tenure, salary increases, or promotion.

One recommendation contained in the Chen et al. (2003) study is the need for organizations to address how they might motivate students to participate in the evaluation process. If students were informed of the purpose or intended use of the information elicited through the evaluation instrument and if those uses were consistent with what the students felt were relevant, the authors suggest that the students would feel motivated to provide meaningful input (Chen et al.). They note that in order to maintain that sense of value, students would need to receive feedback on the impact of the evaluations. For example, a course syllabus could include "one recent example of how student evaluations have helped improve this particular course or the instructor to improve his or her teaching" (Chen et al., p. 84). Diamond notes that feedback from instructors who received comments as a result of a midterm facilitated student discussion on course/instruction performance made changes to their instructional techniques, assignments, and grading and refocused course content on the basis of their increased understanding of how students responded to their instructional methods (Diamond, 2004). She also observes that instructors indicated an intention to amend future course delivery in order to rectify the weaknesses identified.

Jackson et al. (1999) identify and define eight instructional qualities students considered to be of significance in the assessment of instructor performance. They included (a) course organization, (b) course design, (c) instructor rapport with students, (d) course value, (e) course difficulty, (f) fairness in grading, (g) assessment and, (h) feedback. Those qualities were tested in the school of hospitality business management at Washington State University by Gursoy and Umbreit, who proposed four constructs upon which student evaluations would be based (2005). These included teacher organization, course workload, teacher instructional abilities, and student assessment of their perception of their learning. The study concludes that organization, workload, and instructional abilities had a specific positive impact on the students' perceptions of their learning.

A number of studies have linked instructor attitude to student evaluations of instructor performance (Beran & Violato, 2005; Kim, Damewood, & Hodge, 2000; Van Ast & Field, 2005). In a study of 1,504 students in 76 undergraduate and graduate classes in a midwestern U.S. university, Kim et al. found that students who perceived positive attitudes exhibited by professors tended to evaluate their instructors higher in teacher effectiveness. Similar findings were observed in a U. S. college setting by Van Ast and Field. Those findings were supported in a Canadian quantitative research study involving a review of a total of 371,131 student ratings taken over a 3-year period from 1999 to 2002, where the authors found that students give higher ratings to instructors they consider to be effective. This would indicate that those ratings are influenced by the behaviour of the instructors themselves (Beran & Violato) including their capacity to provide an environment in which students are encouraged to realize their full potential (Purkey & Novak, 1984; Russell, 1992).

A great deal of research has centred on the usefulness of student evaluations in the assessment of faculty effectiveness (Aleomoni, 1987; Centra, 1979; Seldin, 1984). Centra's text titled *Determining Faculty Effectiveness* outlines the goals and objectives of faculty evaluations and the methods by which information can be gathered to assess instructor performance. Based on a significant study of 300,000 students in 16,000 classes in 100 U.S. colleges, the author identified a number of variables that he suggested could affect ratings, such as class size, course requirements, instructor characteristics, and teaching load. He noted the limitations of numerical data inherent in a Likert scale and considered narrative comments to be a more effective method of feedback (Centra,).

Concerns were noted with instrument development and content (Centra, 1979; Seldin, 1984), applicability of assessment criteria (E. Cohen, 2005; Saunders & Williams, 2005), and the competence of the students to assess certain aspects such as instructor knowledge (Abrami & Mizener, 1983; Chen et al., 2003). For example, the physical design of the form, including what could be considered a reasonable number of questions to ask students, the types of evaluation scales utilized (whether they be Likert scale, narrative, or a combination of both), and the selection of specific areas for feedback are questions that continue to be of concern when developing evaluation instruments. In addition, is it appropriate or reasonable to require students to make an assessment of the instructor's knowledge if the assumption is made that the purpose of the students attending that course is to obtain that knowledge? Is the evaluation grid used to assess performance clear, and does it discriminate sufficiently between levels of assessment?

Few studies have traced the links between learner needs with respect to evaluation and the content of the evaluation form itself. Heppner and Johnston noted in their

analysis of students at both the undergraduate and graduate level that they appreciated the opportunity to participate in an evaluation process that occurred midsemester, when corrective action could be taken (Heppner & Johnston, 1994). Pratt (1998) suggests that there should be agreement on what "technical aspects are universal and necessary to be a good teacher" (p. 262) and argues that "even the most generic of skills must bend to the conditions of who, what, and where the teaching is being done" (p. 263).

Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, and Turrentine (2006) recommend a number of strategies to assess graduate student needs, including: issues of access and timing of the study, the need to pay attention to the political landscape of graduate education, the necessity to communicate the intended purpose of the study, as well as the intended uses of the information, and recognition and acknowledgement of the limitations of assessment methods and results. The authors also reflect on the notion of power within an academic setting and suggest that the "tendency of a postsecondary institution is to focus on the policies, programs and practices designed for full-time students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two" (Nesheim et al., p. 20).

Some research studies have focussed on characteristics which may or may not affect student ratings. These characteristics include gender (Basow, 1995; Riniolio, Johnson, Sherman, & Misso, 2006), personality (Abrami & Mizener, 1983), and instructor language ability (Ogier, 2005). In the study by Riniolio et al., gender differences were observed to play a role in the evaluation process, with more attractive professors receiving higher ratings. In contrast, a 2005 study concerning the on-line site "ratemyprofessors.com" notes that students were primarily concerned with instructional quality, whereas personality and appearance were secondary motivators (Kindred &

Mohammend, 2005). Two studies have indicated that in order to obtain positive evaluations, female instructors were required to demonstrate characteristics that are both feminine (warmth, accessibility) and masculine (well prepared, decisive, and confident) (Freeman, 1994; Kierstead, D'Agostino,Dill, 1988).

Instructional characteristics, that is, the manner in which the instructor effectively implements teaching strategies to engage the learners, is the subject of research conducted by Althouse et al. (1998), Kindred and Mohammed (2005), and Radmacher and Martin (2001). Although there is some indication that the results of evaluation are affected by the gender of the instructor, the study by Radmacher and Martin indicates that the more positive, outgoing, or engaged the instructor is in course delivery, the higher the rating by the students. On the basis of a research study involving 88 students in a graduate program, a sense of humour on the part of the instructor (and/or the affiliation of the student with that sense of humour) may also affect the manner in which the instructor is evaluated (Waechther, Newman, & Rosenkoetter 1998).

The impact of the content of evaluation instruments on the effectiveness and reliability of student evaluation has been addressed in some detail (Diamond, 2004; Martensson, 1997; Nasser & Fresko, 2002; Pidcock, 2006; Saunders & Williams, 2005). The findings indicate that in order to provide substantive, valuable feedback, the design of the evaluation form should include areas where it is reasonable to assume that students have some level of expertise (Martensson; Pratt, 1998). For example, students have the expertise to comment on level of engagement or interest by the instructor or how the course is structured in comparison to learning objectives. Students do not have sufficient knowledge or experience to assess the level of knowledge held by the instructor. The

elimination of general questions in favour of a more focussed evaluation geared towards course objectives and instructor performance is offered as a suggestion to improve the quality of the evaluation process (Kember, 2003; Saroyan & Amundsen, 2001; Sprague & Massoni, 2005).

In summary, the debate continues on the usefulness and relevance of student course/instructor evaluations and how the evaluations could best be developed to respond to the needs of those involved in the process. Concerns have been identified in how the evaluative criteria are framed and described, how different characteristics or situations impact on the evaluation process (race, gender, personality, class size, level of student, perspective), and whether the evaluation should be limited to either course- or content-related questions. The semistructured interview methodology chosen in this study to elicit the needs of part-time students concerning course/instructor evaluation and the comparison of the needs with the course/instructor evaluation form will provide some clarification on the relevance of the evaluation criteria established by the Faculty of Education. Alternatively, the findings could provide some direction on how course/instructor evaluations could better meet the needs of the part-time graduate students, course instructors, or the Faculty of Education. To address some of the issues raised concerning the selection of strategies to assess graduate students' needs (Nesheim et al., 2006), the methodology chosen in this study presents a number of opportunities to clarify the intended purpose of the study, to assure participants of the level of confidentiality afforded to the data obtained, and to give voice to the participants' needs or concerns.

Instructor Perception of the Value of Student Evaluations

As the focus of this research relates specifically to the needs and interests of part-time students in a graduate Master of Education program and the congruency of those needs and interests with course/instructor evaluation forms, it is appropriate to reach some level of understanding of the value, if any, placed by instructors on the information obtained from those instruments.

Brookfield's concept of the "reflective practitioner" (Brookfield, 1990) aptly describes the internal dialogue in which instructors engage themselves when reviewing their effectiveness as teachers. That dialogue is fed by a variety of elements, not the least of which is the evaluation process in which they are constantly engaged with their students (Fenwick & Parsons, 2000). Palmer (1998) suggests that good teachers "join self and subject and students in fabric of life". He describes how teaching in a way which was integral to his own nature involved increasing levels of self-knowledge, which in turn assisted him on his journey towards becoming a better teacher. Taylor and Dirkx (2002) argue that the lack of a sufficiently deep level of internal reflection makes it more difficult for teachers to identify and describe the assumptions or perspectives which underlie their practice. Looking at one's practice through different perspectives and understanding how others may come to the evaluation process from a perspective different from one's own adds an additional dimension to the value as well as the relevance of the information obtained (Pratt, 1998).

Daniel Pratt (1998) distils the issue of instructor evaluation into three separate questions which he believes form the basis for the evaluation process and which he argues are tied to individual perspectives held by both the evaluator and the individual being

evaluated. These five perspectives: transmission, apprenticeship, nurturing, developmental and social reform provide different lenses by which one can view the teaching and learning process and, by extension, the process of evaluation (Pratt). The three questions include: Who is being evaluated; who are the evaluators; and what is being evaluated. By understanding the perspective by which those involved in the evaluation process come to that activity, we gain a clearer picture of what they are saying and why.

Pratt describes the five perspectives in relationship to the teaching environment which is made up of five components: the learners, the teacher, the content, the ideals, and the larger organizational context within which the teaching environment is situated. Pratt describes ideals as the beliefs or values that influence the teacher and considers them a key component that should be understood in order to effectively evaluate teaching (Pratt, 1998). Dependent upon the individual perspective held by the teacher, the interplay between the five components shifts in importance. For example, the *transmission* perspective places power in the hands of the instructor; the authority rests with the instructor to determine what and how learning will be assessed. *Apprenticeship* is characterized by teacher and content acting as one, with the teacher modelling behaviour, knowledge, skills, and attitudes to the learner and acting as "gate-keeper" to the profession. Learners are the focus of the *developmental* perspective, and there is a strong link between the learner and the content, with the teacher facilitating the learning process to assist the learners in making a qualitative change in understanding and thinking. Pratt describes this perspective as "cultivating ways of thinking" (p. xii). The *nurturing* perspective is labelled "facilitating self-efficacy" (p. xii); the learner and teacher approach

the content together, with the teacher providing support and encouragement throughout the learning process, helping the learner become more self-sufficient and confident. The final perspective, *social reform*, reflects the key component of the teacher's ideals and the significance they play in the shaping of both the content and the teaching strategies used. Empowering learners through development of skills or abilities designed to change their social context is a critical element of the social reform perspective.

Pratt states that instructor/course evaluation must be linked with these five perspectives in mind, as they are integral to deep approaches to evaluation. Focussing on the surface approaches to evaluation (does the instructor fulfill his/her duties effectively or are the technical aspects of teaching effectively conducted?) ignores the ideals, beliefs, or values of the instructor that shape the content. By making connections between instructor beliefs and intentions and the planning, implementation, and learning outcomes, a deeper, more effective evaluation of teaching will occur. He argues:

> To be rigorous in the evaluation of teaching requires a fundamental change in approach – one that shifts the focus of evaluation from surface features to deeper structures, and one that asks "why" more than "how". Without this crucial shift in approach, teaching will continue to be seen as a relatively mechanistic activity, devoid of the most essential ingredient – one's professional identity. (Pratt, 1998, p. 279)

How faculty members view the relevance of information obtained from the evaluation process is predicated, in part, by the stated purpose or intent of the evaluation (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Nasser & Fresko, 2002). Gibbs and Coffey, in their study of university teachers' training involving 22 universities in eight countries, concluded that

one positive impact of teacher training was an increase in the extent to which their students adopted a deeper approach to learning. In other words, the positive impact of the training fostered a difference in how teaching was seen to be valued and improvements to teaching encouraged, in contrast to pressure to conform to a primarily teacher-focussed approach.

Aleomoni (1987) identifies seven concerns faculty members have with student evaluations, including:

- lack of consistency,

- lack of competence by the students to evaluate,

- student evaluation schemes that resemble popularity contests favouring warm or approachable instructors,

- inability of students to evaluate instruction without sufficient time or distance with which to reflect on the event,

- unreliable or invalid evaluation forms,

- conditions which can affect ratings (class size, gender), and

- corelation of grade expectations to ratings.

The study by Nasser and Fresko (2002) involving college instructors in Education noted that although there was a correlation between student evaluation and quality of instruction, instructors considered the narrative comments to be of more value than the use of a Likert scale. In response to a number of concerns regarding the reliability, validity, and generalizability of student ratings, the authors of a recent study suggest that specific evaluation criteria be tied to course outcomes or learning objectives (Williams, 2001). As a result, the evaluation process would become more meaningful both for

students and for faculty (Saunders & Williams, 2005). Balancing feedback received through student evaluations with information received from other sources such as peer review and individual self-assessment provides a more comprehensive picture of individual course or instructor strengths and areas for improvement (Pratt, 1998; Saroyan & Amundsen, 2001).

In summary, research studies have shown that student evaluations are reliable indicators of course/instructor performance, with ratings consistent with the values of teaching effectiveness rather than popularity (Marsh & Dunkin, 1993). Although there may be instances where evaluations are affected by course size or course level, overall quality of the evaluations remains consistent. What remains a concern is the stated purpose or intent of the evaluation and the nature and the timing of the evaluation process. This research study will allow the participants to provide their view of what they, as part-time graduate students, consider to be of relevance to their criteria for course/instructor evaluation.

Summary

This literature review is not meant to be exhaustive but, rather, provides some contextual information concerning the three main subject areas upon which the research questions are designed: learner needs in the context of part-time graduate students, course/instructor evaluation, and the potential lack of congruency between the two. A number of research studies have identified criteria which are of interest to students in the course/instructor performance (Beran & Violato, 2005; Ross-Gordon, 2003; Saroyan & Amundsen, 2001). In addition, a number of studies confirm that students are sufficiently mature and experienced to provide reliable assessments of course/instructor performance

(Centra, 1979; Marsh & Dunkin, 1993; Schlenker & McKinnon, 1994; Young et al., 1999). It should be noted that the quality of feedback seems to be reflective of the manner in which the information is requested, with narrative comments perceived as being of more value than ratings based on a Likert scale (Nasser & Fresko, 2002; Saroyan &Amundsen, 2001; Sprague & Massoni, 2005;). Of particular note in the canvassing of available research is that there is no specific reference to the issue of the needs of part-time students within the context of course/instructor evaluation at the postsecondary level. By inquiring into the criteria for course or instructor satisfaction and comparing those criteria to the evaluation instrument, I have identified the specific elements which reflect what part-time students considered important or relevant criteria to the evaluation process or, alternatively, lacked congruency with them.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research was to determine whether there was a link between what part-time Master of Education students consider important or relevant to them in their evaluation of the learning they experienced through courses they have taken and the evaluation criteria contained in the "course/instructor" evaluation forms distributed at the end of each course. By inquiring into the criteria for course or instructor satisfaction and comparing those criteria to the evaluation instrument, I identified the specific elements which reflected what part-time students considered important or relevant criteria to the evaluation process or, alternatively, lacked congruency with them. The dual term course/instructor evaluation was utilized in this study as it captured the dual purpose which was reflected in the questions contained in the evaluation instrument.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the design and methodological framework of the study and the methods used to recruit participants and collect and analyze data. The assumptions and limitations of the study are then outlined. Ethical considerations inherent in this type of research are discussed, and suggestions for its applicability in a broader context are advanced.

Research Design

This research was based on the critical methodological perspective (Creswell, 1998; Schram, 2003). I deconstructed the evaluation instrument to determine the extent to which that instrument reflected the needs of part-time students attending courses in the Master of Education program. Based on a qualitative research methodology, a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000) was utilized in which themes were identified and refined through an analysis, review, and comparison of participant responses during a

semistructured interview. Building on the themes and considering the evaluation instrument through the lens of the participants, I was able to conclude the extent of the congruency between the evaluation criteria contained in the instrument and part-time graduate students' needs.

The research design was based on a qualitative research method which Creswell describes as theory building generated through data collection and analysis (Creswell, 1998). By not imposing preexisting expectations on the research process, theory emerges from how the researcher makes sense of the data provided (Patton, 1990). The theory emerges from, or is grounded in, the words of the participants. The role of the researcher involves constantly looking at data and analyzing to identify themes or patterns which would explain how participants react to certain conditions and the consequence of those actions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The goal of qualitative research is to find understanding and meaning through data collection and analysis, inductive reasoning, and the creation of rich, thick descriptions. In other words, the researcher attempts to build a substantive theory regarding a particular practice which is grounded in reality (Merriam, 1998).

Merriam describes the development of theory using this research methodology as one which develops "substantive rather than formal or grand theory" (Merriam, 1998, p. 17). Consequently, the theory is grounded in real-life situations, with the result that the findings are both specific and useful in practice. Charmaz recommends a structured approach such that the researcher needs to move from the collection and analysis of the data to the creation of theoretical frameworks which explain what has been collected (Charmaz, 2000, 2006). The constant need to collect, review, reflect, compare, and

analyze information was a key component of this design in which elements, subcategories, and categories emerged into specific theories which reflected the voice of the participants.

As Charmaz noted, Glaser found it critical that the theory come from the data, not from the researcher, and any preconceived notion must be reflected in the data and emerge from them rather than be superimposed upon them (Charmaz, 2006). Glaser characterizes this process as "earning its way" (Glaser as cited in Charmaz, 2006) into the analysis. One of the challenges associated with this research design was the need for the researcher to remain open to changing theories that emerged from the analyzed data and allow for the refinement of data, as the meanings and actions of the participants take precedence over the interests of the researcher (Charmaz, 2000, 2006). Remaining open to emerging theory through data analysis and reflection was a key component of this research design process.

Participant Selection and Eligibility Criteria

Three criteria were used in the determination of eligibility for selection of research participants.

First, given the focus of the research question, participants had to be currently enrolled in the Master of Education program on a part-time basis. Only those participants who were employed on a part-time or full-time basis were included, as research has shown that a significant number of students who return to the graduate level in education hold full- or part-time jobs while enrolled in their studies (Choy & Cataldi, 2006; Polson, 2003).

Second, participants needed to have sufficient expertise with the course/instructor

evaluation form to provide input as to its usefulness and relevance to the courses taken. A minimum of three courses (slightly less than half of the required course load) was established as a cut-off point to ensure that participants would have had the opportunity to take at least one required and possibly two elective courses. In this way, participants could reflect on their different experiences with a number of different instructors in different subject areas. Consequently, they may have formed a clearer picture of what evaluation criteria might be used to differentiate between their positive, negative, or neutral assessments of courses and instructors. Participants were drawn from the four different fields of study within the Master of Education program. Participant selection reflected representation from the three geographical sites in which courses are offered. Table 1 provides a summary of the demographics (field of study, location, and number of courses completed) for each of the participants in this study.

Finally, in order to minimize gender bias, participant selection reflected the ratio of male/female participation within the Master of Education program. Specifically, 77.2% of the part-time student population registered in the Master of Education program was female (The University, 2006). The ratio of male/female participation in the entire Master of Education program for the academic year 2006-2007 was approximately 22:78 (The University).

In summary, the eligibility criteria for participant selections were that participants:

1. be currently registered in the part-time Master of Education program within the University;

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participants	Field of study	Number of courses completed	Course location
Participant1	Curriculum	4	Location 1
Participant 2	Administration	5	Location 1, Location 2, Location 3
Participant 3	Curriculum	All (thesis)	Location 1
Participant 4	Administration	6	Location 2
Participant 5	Teaching and Learning	All (thesis)	Location 1, Location 2, Location 3
Participant 6	Teaching and Learning	All (thesis)	Location 1, Location 3

2. have completed a minimum of three courses within that program;

3. be representative of a variety of curriculum streams;

4. be employed on a full- or part-time basis;

5. reflect the male to female participation rates of 1:4 present in the registration of part-time Master of Education students for the academic year 2006-2007;

6. represent as much as possible the three geographic sites at which the Master of Education courses are delivered.

Recruitment Procedures

I received final clearance from the Research Ethics Board on July 24, 2007 (Appendix B). Using contacts developed with individuals attending postgraduate programs in Education, in late July 2007 I approached a number of possible candidates, using the email script I had developed, to determine their interest and availability to participate in this project. I anticipated that the participants might be known to me or might be referred to me by others attending postgraduate programs in Ontario universities. Based on their expressions of interest, I sent a written confirmation (by mail or email) explaining the approach to be taken, including the steps to protect confidentiality as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Six participants were chosen for this research study.

Once the list of participants was identified, I arranged an interview schedule for a date, time, and location convenient to each individual. I ensured that the participants signed the written consent form before the interview was conducted. I had anticipated that there might be some difficulties finding opportunities to interview participants during the summer months, as they are traditionally months when individuals take vacation.

However, with the exception of 1 participant, all the interviews were conducted in July and August of 2007. The sixth interview took place in September 2007. I had not anticipated that the participants would travel to meet me for the interview. However, as a result of a number of requests from participants, I met with 1 individual at my home and 2 individuals at my place of business. I conducted one interview at the home of a participant, and I conducted two interviews at the participants' workplaces. All interviews were conducted in person, as participants preferred a physical meeting to a telephone interview. There were no challenges associated with finding participants who had completed a minimum of three courses in the Master of Education program.

All participants in this study were part-time students employed on either a full- or part-time basis, and all were currently enrolled in the Master of Education program in an Ontario-based University on a part-time basis. A total of 6 participants were interviewed, 5 of whom were women, which is reflective of the male to female participation rate for the academic year 2006-2007. Table 1 provides more detailed information concerning the participants' status in the program, including program stream, geographic location in which courses were taken, as well as the number of courses each has completed. Of the 6 participants, 1 was employed in a primary/secondary school environment, 3 in a postsecondary environment, and 2 in a business environment.

Data Collection and Analysis

The methodological approach used in this study was comprised of three distinct phases: (a) the development of the content of the data-gathering instrument, (b) the manner in which data were collected and processed, and (c) the approach taken to analyze data.

Data Instrumentation

I developed a semistructured interview questionnaire (Appendix C) to capture participant feedback and divided it into three main areas. The first section asked the participants to provide some background information about themselves, including their employment status, their reasons for pursuing the Master of Education program, and an indication of which courses they had completed.

The second section provided the opportunity for the participant to explain the criteria which differentiate a "good course" from a "great course" and the qualities of instructors which they observed as contributing to that description. Participants were also provided with the opportunity to explain criteria which reflected any negative experiences they may have had. By asking a series of questions allowing participants to expand on their definition and use examples to illustrate and support their position, I gathered data that allowed me to then summarize for them the main themes they had identified. In that way, before proceeding to the next section of the interview, I was able to confirm with the participants that I had accurately captured and understood the criteria they had outlined.

In the third section of the interview, I built on the main points that the participants had raised and that I had summarized. I gave to each participant a copy of the University Master of Education Course Evaluation form (Appendix A). I asked the participant to reflect on how that form compared to the themes that the he or she had identified as being important in the evaluation of both course and instructor.

In summary, the semistructured interview guide was divided into three main areas including personal or tombstone data designed to place the participant at ease, questions designed to elicit participant criteria by which they evaluated both courses and instructors,

and an assessment by the participants of the extent to which the existing University's Master of Education Evaluation form was congruent with their own personal evaluation criteria.

As part of a qualitative research course a few months earlier, I had conducted a pilot interview using a similar semistructured interview guide. I found the structure and format of the interview to be an effective tool to elicit information from the participant in the three main areas. I added one additional question to elicit further clarification of the impact of the instructor on the overall evaluation rating provided by the student.

Data Collection

A semistructured audiotaped interview process (Fontana & Frey, 2000) was utilized to explore the criteria that participants considered were most relevant for the evaluation of a Master's level course and course instructor. Using the criteria established by the participant, I explored with him or her how these personal criteria compared to the elements contained in the Master of Education course/instructor evaluation form. I asked the participant to explain to what extent the evaluation form addressed the needs he or she has previously identified.

I conducted the 45-90 minute interview in a location chosen by the participant which was relatively quiet and free from background noise, as the interview was audiotaped. At the outset of the interview I reviewed the purpose of the research, the assurance of confidentiality of the information provided, and reiterated the opportunity for the participant to withdraw from the process at any time. I commenced the semistructured interview once all questions or concerns had been addressed and the consent form had been signed. Once the interview was completed, I reminded the participants that a copy

of the transcribed interview would be sent to them for review to ensure that I had

accurately and successfully captured all of their words.

I hired someone to transcribe the audio recordings subject to the appropriate

confidentiality agreement. I decided in the transcription process to reflect how much detail

should be encoded into the transcript (O'Connell & Kowal, 1999). For example, I asked

the transcriber to make a verbatim transcription of the interview excluding expressions of

emotion (laughter, sighing, coughing, etc.). I made specific notations for laughter, and

words given particular emphasis by the participant were underlined by me after the

transcription was completed and reviewed by the participant.

I sent a copy of the transcribed interview electronically to each participant to

ensure that no errors, omissions, or misinterpretations had occurred. With the exception

of participant 2 who corrected a number of spelling errors, all responded that they were

satisfied that the transcription was an accurate reflection of our interview. I wrote and

thanked them for their co-operation and reminded them of the opportunity to obtain a

copy of the findings once the research study has been completed.

All identifying material was removed from the audiotapes, transcribed interviews,

journal notations, or any other written material (electronic or paper) associated with this

research. I chose a pseudonym for each participant to ensure that confidentiality remained

intact. All documents including the master listing of names and pseudonyms were kept in

a locked cabinet in my home office.

Data Processing and Analysis

Building on the information obtained from the interview, I conducted an analysis

of the data using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000, 2006). Specific themes

emerging from the interviews were analyzed to determine if there were any contradictions evident between what participants had established as those qualities which were representative of a satisfying course and the questions posed in the course/instructor evaluation form. Glaser notes that it is important to allow theory to emerge from the data rather than imposing predetermined categories by which the data are considered (Glaser as cited in Charmaz, 2006). I conducted the data analysis using what Creswell describes as an emerging design approach, which involves the generation of categories and the refinement or distillation of those categories into fewer and fewer categories (Creswell, 2005). Data from each interview supplemented by journal notes were compared with the emerging categories, and theory was developed.

Specifically I read, reviewed, and reread the transcribed interview to identify the elements which emerged in the discussion with the participant and to determine if there were recurring areas of interest or concern. I listened to the audiotape several times to catch nuances of phrasing or emphasis. I reviewed my journal notes to see if additional insights could be found to enrich the data further. These elements and categories were further analyzed, and through a process of axial coding (Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) where data from one segment are compared with data from another segment, I discovered a number of common elements. To further ensure that common elements were included, I typed the list of elements identified for each participant, then merged them into another document in which the elements for all of the participants combined were sorted alphabetically. In this way I was able to identify recurring themes as well as discern if additional common elements could be found.

These groups of elements were given category definitions, and subsequently a

number of general subthemes were identified (Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Merriam, 1998) from which a number of final themes could evolve. For example, data obtained concerning criteria used to evaluate the differences between a "good" course and a "great" course were compared with participants' responses to questions concerning the relevance of specific criteria contained on the course/instructor evaluation form. For example, when describing criteria which differentiated a positive learning experience, all of the participants identified the role of the instructor as a key factor (category). The role of the instructor was characterized differently by the participants, who identified flexibility, adaptability, ability to engage learners, appropriate and varied use of teaching strategies, and so on as important to them. All of these characterizations I captured as subthemes to the overall theme, which I identified as the importance of the instructor.

The data were also sorted by various subthemes, again returning to the question posed. For example, codes which related to teaching strategies were combined with codes related to instructional strategies. As I found the terms to be interchangeable, it made sense to combine them to reflect the emerging theme of learner engagement. Similarly, codes which reflected participant concern with the evaluation process itself were combined with codes related to the timing of the evaluation process. These elements were then reconfigured as it became evident that there was another, larger theme which was emerging from the data related to the overall purpose and intent of the evaluation process.

The coding process involved a continual sorting and resorting of codes, clustering them under smaller subthemes, then into larger themes, trying to make sense of the perspectives of the participants as they emerged from the comments that were made. By returning to the words of the participants, I was able to develop a list of the themes and

subthemes. This list is included in Appendix D. I conducted a review of each transcript to determine which specific themes and subthemes were reflected in each of the participant interviews. This final step assisted in validating that all information was captured and reflected in the final analysis process.

I generated a number of "notes to self" throughout this process to keep track of issues associated with the mechanics of the transcription and coding processes. In addition, some "notes to self" provided an opportunity to capture some of my own reflections which occurred during the research process. Finally, at the end of each interview, I made notes after the interview process itself, my thoughts on the comments raised by the participants as well as "aide memoires" of potential areas for further exploration in the analysis phase. These notes were used after the generation of themes and categories and helped me ensure that some areas of commonality between interviews which I had noted were, in fact, present in the themes that had been generated. In addition, I used the notes to assist me in the preparation of the section dealing with the discussion of the results of the study and the development of recommendations and implications for future research.

I coded the data using pseudonyms I had chosen, and the master listing of pseudonyms and participant names was kept in a locked file cabinet in my home. Care was taken to ensure that no personal identifying features of the participants were reflected in the release of the research findings. In cases where identifying features were considered evident, the data were not used. Direct quotes were scrutinized to ensure that no identifiers could be linked with the participants in the research study.

Researcher Positionality

As a student of the Master of Education program, I have been concerned that the structure, content, and evaluation criteria reflected in the Master of Education course/instructor evaluation form do not provide me with the opportunity to fully contribute to the evaluation process. That concern has, in fact, provided me with the impetus to conduct this research to determine if others have similar views. Throughout the interview, coding, and analysis process, I needed to remain mindful of my responsibility to ensure that the elements identified were coincident with the words used by the participant and not reflective of the ideas or theories held by the researcher. Robertson (2000) contends that researchers need to conduct an ongoing reflection-on-reality within the research process. Given my personal concerns with the evaluation process, I anticipated the need to constantly check myself to ensure that I was not only accurately transcribing the words of the participant but successfully capturing tone, emphasis, and phrasing in my transcription, review, and analysis. Building theory, while remaining true to the comments made by the participants (Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Tilley, 2003), required a significant level of diligence on my part.

With the exception of 1 participant, I knew and selected all of the participants in this study. I had taken at least one course with a number of the participants. One participant was introduced to me, and the name of the remaining participant was referred to me. I had some idea of their thoughts on evaluation through discussions we had on previous occasions, and I felt that their interest in the topic might provide some insight to me in the conduct of the study. In addition, I believed, based on my limited interactions with them, that they would provide thoughtful and diverse views on the topic. I had

limited knowledge of the ideas the remaining 2 participants possessed with respect to the evaluation process but was not disappointed in the candour or thoughtfulness either displayed in the interview process.

Establishing Credibility

The research process is fraught with decision-making at various points within the process, and decisions made continue to shape the findings and perhaps ultimately influence the conclusions reached. The selection of participants, the form and content of the interviews, the manner in which prompts are given, the details captured in the transcription and journal notes, and ultimately the coding of the data involve a significant degree of interplay between the researcher and the participant. Multiple participants in a more comprehensive research study add a higher degree of complexity and difficulty to the process while allowing a richer, more detailed analysis and development of themes. By triangulating the data that emerge between and among the participants, more subthemes and overarching themes were identified.

In addition, I utilized the services of a second coder to validate consistency in the coding process. This individual's role was to review 10-15% of the data-capture coding process to ensure consistency in approach which, in turn, would provide additional credibility to the themes which emerged. The selection of a transcribed interview was made randomly. The selected transcript was provided to the second coder with a list of possible coding notations as well as an initial list of themes (Appendix D) which had emerged from the preliminary analysis of five of the six interview transcripts. Capturing additional information through the use of my journal notes assisted in further enriching the data. The concept of "thick descriptions" (Charmaz, 2006) is an important component

of grounded theory, as the descriptions add to and support the data as they emerge.

Finally, the process of verifying information with the participants after each interview

ensured that the participant's voice was reflected in the data captured.

Methodological Assumptions

It was anticipated that participants in this research would be reasonably

forthcoming in their views of what they considered to be important in the criteria they

chose to select and evaluate particular courses and/or instructors in the Master of

Education program. It was necessary to provide participants with a clear understanding

and assurance of the manner in which confidentiality was maintained in terms of both the

data gathering and analysis and representation of that information in the final thesis itself.

This assurance formed part of the invitation, explanation, and subsequent debriefing of

each participant and was an important step within the research process itself. It was also

assumed that the design of the semistructured interview process was sufficiently flexible

to provide opportunities for the participants to actively engage in a dialogue with the

researcher so as not to inhibit their ability to provide rich and varied input to the data

gathering process. Although it was initially anticipated that the interview would take

approximately 45 minutes, most of the interviews occurred over a 60- to 75-minute

period, with one lasting 90 minutes.

Methodological Limitations

I did not have the time to conduct a thoughtful evaluation of the perceptions of a

large number of part-time graduate students, given the scope of this research study;

however I am of the opinion that the information provided by the participants may serve

as an indication of the challenges and opportunities inherent in the course/instructor

evaluation process at the graduate level.

Ethical Considerations

As a researcher, I had some reservations concerning the nature of this topic and the relationship I might have had with the individuals who participated in the interviews. As Acker (2000) and Sherif (2001) suggest, the relationship is one of indigenous-insider, where our mutual experience in other environments as well as our overall view of the evaluation process could be similar. Care was taken to balance participant feedback with my own impressions. I constantly went back to the interviews to ensure that the themes which emerged during the coding process could be linked back to the participants' words.

The semistructured nature of the interview provided an opportunity to explore the topic from a number of different perspectives before delving into the relevance of the evaluation instrument itself, which, in my opinion, provided a counterbalance to my concerns. In this way, the participants established their own criteria for selection and assessment of courses and instructors before being asked to comment on an existing evaluation form.

It was possible that there might have been some emotional stress associated with giving information concerning instructor/course feedback if the participants felt that there was some risk for their identity to be known to the thesis committee members, particularly if the participants chose to take a course with those individuals in the future. These concerns were mitigated by the fact that two of the committee members would be away on academic leave, one of whom will continue on leave the academic year after the publication of the thesis. However, given the number of courses completed by the participants at the time of this study, it is reasonable to assume that by the time these two

committee members will be back teaching, the students will have completed their course work. As well, any stress felt by the participants may have been significantly reduced by the attention to measures of ensuring confidentiality in data collection and the efforts to protect the identity of the participants through the use of pseudonyms. Particular emphasis was placed on the steps taken to protect individual confidentiality in data gathering, transcribing, analysis, and the final thesis document itself.

I also had some concerns with how to mask the information which was specific to courses taken by the participant, thereby assuring that the information remained confidential. In my opinion, this was a major challenge in the data capture, analysis, and final written phase of this research. Individual professor names were camouflaged using the designation of Professor 1, Professor 2. Similarly, course titles or identifying course numbers were masked to reduce the opportunity for identification of individuals. However, it may not have taken much effort by the second coder to analyze the transcript and ascertain a corelation between course name and potential course instructors responsible for its delivery.

On a broader level, I had concerns that the information assessed as part of this Master's thesis could be of specific detriment to individual professors, particularly in those instances in which participants described particular positive or negative learning experiences. This could have been of some concern in instances where participants made specific reference to individuals who were members of the thesis review committee. However, that concern was offset by the masking of individual names as part of the coding process. Although a number of thesis committee members included individuals who have had some decision-making authority concerning instructor selection or

evaluation, those individuals were not, at the time of this research, continuing in that role.

The risks of potential embarrassment or speculation needed to be weighed against the benefits gained by a study of this kind. Alternatively, I wondered if this concern, in effect, "dishonours" my participants and the candour with which the responses were provided to my questions. In a sense it could have led to the opposite of what Harrison, MacGibbon, and Morton (2001) describe as reciprocity and trustworthiness inherent in the conversation between the participants and me. On reflection, I found that the responses provided by the participants were sufficiently detailed to allow for specific themes to emerge in which I was able to mask information peculiar to any one instructor or any one course without compromising the meaning of the comments provided. The openness and candour demonstrated by the participants and the breadth and depth of their comments added significantly to the data.

Summary

The purpose of this research was to establish whether a link exists between the evaluation criteria for courses and instructors in The University's Master of Education program and what part-time Master of Education students consider to be important or relevant to them in the evaluation of the learning they have experienced while enrolled in that program. By focusing on the perceptions held by students on what they considered important, the emerging themes provided the lens through which an analysis was conducted on the value and relevancy of the current evaluation criteria established for the course/instructor evaluation process.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

This chapter outlines the criteria established by the participants as important or relevant to them in their evaluation of the learning they experienced through courses taken towards completion of their Master of Education degree. It then identifies the perceptions of the participants regarding the course/instructor evaluation form, and it explores, in more detail, the participants' assessment of how the criteria which they had identified as important may or may not be reflected in the elements of the evaluation form itself. The chapter will also focus on the additional dimensions raised by the participants concerning issues of process, format, and timing of the evaluation process and the role of the instructor. In the context of this inquiry, importance was considered to be those behaviours, processes, or practices which participants believed were essential to a positive learning experience. Relevance was considered in the context of the individual participant experience; it is the link between the learners' individual needs and what the course or instructor provided to add value to the learning experience

The approach taken in this research study was, first, to ask each participant to identify what he or she considered to be the criteria to be of most importance or relevance in the evaluation of courses taken in the Master of Education program. Second, the participants were asked to review the existing course/instructor evaluation form to determine if it addressed the criteria which they had identified as important or relevant to them. As all the participants considered that the existing form did not adequately address their criteria, I asked them to explain what elements they considered should be included or discarded. The participants expanded on a number of issues regarding the evaluation process itself, including format, timing, and purpose.

The participants in the research study consisted of 6 students enrolled on a part-time basis in the Master of Education program. All had completed a minimum of three courses towards their degree and were representative of students from all three locations in which courses were delivered. The participants reflected the gender distribution within the Master of Education program and were also representative of the fields of study offered by the department. Using a qualitative research methodology, an initial coding process was conducted which resulted in a number of subthemes identified from the discussion with the participants. These subthemes were further refined and compared across participants, and consequently a number of themes emerged which form the basis for the findings. The themes capture the voice of the participants and are grounded in the discussions that were held with each individual. The reporting of the findings in this chapter reflects the individual and collective voices of those that participated in this study.

Identification of Participant Criteria for Course/Instructor Evaluation

Table 2 represents a thematic summary of the criteria which the participants identified as important in their evaluation of courses and instructors at the graduate level. Five themes were identified: relevance of content to the individual learner; value for time and money spent in the course; importance of the instructor to the learning process (instructor engagement, flexibility, and adaptability); structured framework; and opportunity for self-reflection in the learning. With the exception of self-reflection and the need for a structured framework within which the course is taught, participants were consistent in their articulation of what they considered to be important criteria to differentiate between a positive and less than positive learning experience.

Table 2

Characteristics of a Positive Learning Experience:The Students' Perspective

Criteria	P-1	P-2	P-3	P-4	P-5	P-6
Relevance of content to individual learner	X	X	X	X	X	X
Value for money/time spent (student as consumer)	X	X	X	X	X	X
Importance of instructor						
• to learning process	X	X	X	X	X	X
• engagement of learners	X	X	X	X	X	X
• flexibility and adaptability	X	X	X	X	X	X
Structured framework for course			X		X	
Opportunity for self-reflection		X	X		X	X

Relevance

A common thread throughout all the participants' responses was the requirement that the course be relevant to them as an individual, whether in the context of their personal development, their concept of value in the learning process, or within the context of their work environment.

I always have to take everything back to the context of learning or to that business context…and the courses that were the most useful, that I really enjoyed, allowed me to take something back from outside of the teaching and learning context. (Participant 5)

I have been turned on to some very interesting writers, very interesting concepts, ways of approaching the classroom, ways that bring what I know into new areas of learning or content that I had not considered before…these have been hallmarks of better courses. (Participant 2)

The responses of 2 participants focussed on personal development. One considered relevance in the context of individual growth and development and saw the role of the professor as one who would

expose me to things, new learnings, or even frameworks that would stretch me. (Participant 4)

Another's focus was also on her personal development but within the context of her own interests:

How it meets my interests is very, very important. I will learn if it meets my interests. (Participant 1)

Participant 6 offered a similar characterization of the need for the course to be relevant in the context of her personal and intellectual development:

It is important that the subject matter is relevant to who you are as an individual.

A number of participants considered relevance at an affective level. They described their learning using words or phrases that illustrated the feelings they experienced.

Participant 2 described the Master of Education program as one of the "better research-based programs...other ones are coursebased," stating that the university

has the integrity, the voracity of research...and it's making me hang on...I am sure

I am going to find it, because I have found it. (Participant 2)

Participant 4 characterized positive and negative feelings associated with different course experiences:

And there has been quite a few occasions where it hasn't been what I expected,

sometimes in a good way, sometimes in a bad way. (Participant 4)

Another participant linked the relevance of her course work to her own enjoyment:

And I did two...courses and I loved them, they were great...I think I got the most

out of them. (Participant 5)

In summary, the participants considered relevance to be a key criterion against which they would measure the learning experience. The individual context of relevance differed amongst participants, with some considering it to be satisfaction with the experience itself and others with the acquisition of knowledge or understanding (learning). Despite the differences in the employment background of the participants, with some in a business role, others in a postsecondary environment, and others in an

administrative capacity, it remained a common theme throughout their identification of what was important in the evaluation of courses and instructors at the graduate level.

Value for Money/Time Spent

Although there were some variations on the context within which value would be assessed, all participants indicated very strongly that there needed to be a corelation between the value of the time that they spent and the benefit that they gained from the experience. The overall characterization of the student as a consumer (where the course experience is measured against student time and money spent) was a recurring theme throughout the discussions. Emphasis was placed by the participants on the importance of the academic experience to be worthy of the time, energy, and dollars they had spent. All of the participants associated the concept of value for money with the challenges they faced in balancing their time and energy between work, school, and family life.

Participant 4 suggests that her assessment of value is tied to the manner in which the course was conducted.

I expect something from the professor. I expect them to also teach. I don't just want lecture, lecture, lecture. When they just sit down and say, let's do four presentations today, I really feel that I am not getting value for time, value for my money.

Although it is important what we (as students) think, I pay money and come to have someone who is an expert tell me something too.

Participant 2 linked the time spent to the value of the learning experience:

There was a time in my last course….where I thought, I am paying way too much money for what I am getting.

Specific differences in how themes were described were tied to the environment in which individual participants were situated. For example, those employed in a postsecondary academic environment tailored many of their responses to that milieu, either in the context of themselves as a learner or in the context of the impact on the university program or instructor.

I would like to have a voice in how things are done. I want it to be a great experience for me and for others in the future.…if there is a professor who is not doing a great job, I am going to let them know, and if they are doing a great job, I am going to let them know as well. (Participant 3)

I don't think I would really bash an instructor–he or she is doing their job…evaluation style or approach is affected by the fact …are an instructor, at a postsecondary level. (Participant 1)

There is very little input given from the people who are consuming the product…it would be very difficult for the university. It's really changing the way of thinking. And you are going to get people saying "but the students don't know as much as we know"…we (the University) are taking the longer view. (Participant 6)

Those in a business environment tended to give examples which were tied primarily to a return on investment, in either time or money, and saw value in how the learning related to their work.

I know of people who are half or three quarters of the way through saying this is not what I expected…I don't even know if I am getting what I want out of it…didn't feel I was getting value for money or for time. (Participant 4)

I have to explain to my boss, who will not pay for it again, so it does have to have

value for money. There absolutely has to be value for money. But I look at it and

say, "Did I learn something and can I take it back to my work?" That's where I

look for the value. (Participant 5)

Others in a primary/secondary environment linked value to instructional strategies

demonstrated and the time spent.

I would argue that I got nothing out of it (the course), absolutely nothing. I think

as a parent, if teachers are doing that in the classroom, I don't want that for my

child. That's not good teaching. Yet here are examples of supposedly good

instruction, and this is what I am getting for that much money? (Participant 2)

Although all participants identified value for money/time spent, the

characterization or description of that value reflected, to some extent, their individual

employment circumstances. The part-time nature of their studies coupled with their full-

time employment backgrounds provided different perspectives on how each defined value

for money/time spent.

Role of Instructor

Another common thread which appeared throughout the discussions was the

importance of the instructor to the overall learning experience. All 6 participants

highlighted the importance of the instructor taking an active role in shaping the learning

experience through the use of different teaching strategies designed to engage learners.

All noted the importance of the instructor to demonstrate flexibility and adaptability in the

selection of teaching and evaluation strategies. Some suggested that instructors link

assignments to individual interests to improve the overall value of the course to the

learner. The added dimension of how group dynamics were affected by, or, in turn

affected, the role of the instructor was also highlighted.

Participant 4 noted that it was important to have a balance between active

participation by the students and the instructor taking an active role in discussion,

explanation, and drawing the learning back to the theoretical constructs relevant to the

particular course.

And I really felt that there was an expert in the room, totally wasted, because they

sat back and just watched, and we delivered our own course to each other.

Participant 6 linked the instructor to the learning process. The interplay between

the instructor, the text, and the individual dynamics of the particular group of learners was

affected by how the instructor facilitated the learning experience.

You can look at it almost from an external point of view, and it has to do with the

professor, probably the book, and the dynamics of the class itself. And in certain

cases the dynamics are the group of people who've clicked; there is an energy that

does not happen in all the classes.

Participant 2 made a similar linkage characterizing the professor as

intelligent beyond belief, and excited about what she was doing, is engaged with

the students, practical, has a framework, let's fly with it...and encourages us to

find ways to connect the answers to those questions to what we want...I mean,

everything that's good about what it should be and what we were told is being a

role model.

Participant 5 highlighted the importance of the flexibility of the instructor in providing an opportunity for the participants to apply the learning to their individual contexts.

And what made them interesting was the interactive, practical …it was applicable, we would need to use the information and apply it, and we all had the opportunity to focus it on our own particular learning needs versus meeting the needs of the professor.

Participant 3 spoke of the value of active teaching strategies to her learning experience.

I also appreciated courses where we did some active learning in the classroom. …sharing experiences, describing our experiences relative to a topic, and then we would move around and talk to other people. I found it really interesting. I had one instructor whose approach to teaching was very much a transmission approach, and I was very frustrated by that.

Although similar to the first criterion, this concept of instructor engagement specifically targeted the desire by the learners that the instructor create an environment where learners were actively engaged with the instructor in the learning process and where the methods used by the instructor to foster that engagement included a variety of teaching and learning strategies. Of particular note was the comment by 2 of the participants that learner engagement was predicated upon the active engagement by the instructor. In other words, it was insufficient for the instructor to create opportunities for active student involvement in the teaching and learning process through the use of student-led presentations and guided discussions. Rather, there was an expectation that

the instructor would take an active role in leading students through the process, explaining, coaching, correcting, and guiding them in the learning journey. This concept of instructor engagement is different from value. It operationalizes the teaching and learning experience, reflecting that it is the intentionality associated with the actions or strategies of the instructor which creates and promotes learner engagement

In summary, the role of the instructor was a significant criterion against which participants evaluated the learning experience. An active, dynamic role through the selection of appropriate teaching and learning strategies was seen as a key component of a positive evaluation of both the instructor and the course itself. It is important to note that dynamic does not necessarily imply an outgoing, gregarious instructor, but rather the participants spoke of the instructor as the one individual who had a key role in engaging the learner in the process.

Opportunity for Self-Reflection

Self-reflection and the need to ensure sufficient time to reflect within the learning experience was one criterion which was specifically highlighted by 3 of the 6 participants. All 3 noted that they considered self-reflection to be a significant component which contributed to the learning experience and ultimately contributed to transformative learning.

Participant 3 noted that one course

forced me to look at things from a variety of perspectives…and after taking that course I would look at things from a variety of perspectives. So, of course that really did influence me.

Participant 5 characterized two courses in which the professor and the students

remained constant as ones which provided her with an opportunity to

> do a lot of self-reflection, a lot of introspection on how I was going to develop my
>
> practice around these skills…not only do I have to learn the skills, but determine
>
> how I am going to learn them so they reflect best for me.

The responses provided by participant 6 consistently related to the need for

time to self-reflect, consider in a thoughtful way what had been discussed, or read in order

to provide additional meaning for the experience.

> And there certainly have been classes that I think have been transformative for me,
>
> and sometimes, for me, they have been quite painful because it really is
>
> questioning beliefs. So it's moving from, which is always difficult, from the
>
> familiar to something new. And often that is a private moment, and sometimes I
>
> think I was not always aware of it…and it is difficult to talk about that sometimes
>
> to someone else, if they haven't experienced something similar.

Although the remaining participants did not specifically mention self-reflection,

all alluded to the challenge of finding the time to reflect on the learning process in order to

more fully incorporate the learning within themselves as an individual.

Participant 1 commented:

> It was very important to be as flexible as possible to be able to juggle everything
>
> time-wise…to have the ability to balance off the time to do the best that you could
>
> do.

Participant 5 provided another dimension to the challenge of finding the time to

reflect on the learning process, suggesting that she needed to

translate it, business into teaching for the professor, and then I have to take it back

and translate it back to teaching for the professor, and then I have to take it back

and translate it back from teaching to the business, because I have a requirement to

explain to my boss what I am doing and why it has value, so it just makes the

course harder.

I am not working on it as hard as I can because the constraints between job and

work are killing me and … it is very easy to let it [school] slip.

In summary, the concept of self-reflection, the ability to internalize the learning

and make sense of how it impacts on them on an individual basis, was another criterion

which several of the participants highlighted as important to a positive learning

experience.

Structured Framework

Two participants specifically commented that it was important to have a structured

framework within which the learning was situated. Both considered that the absence of

such a framework created some difficulties for the students in understanding the.

expectations for the course and limited the degree to which students could become

engaged in the learning process.

I really enjoyed when the work was focussed, when your instructor comes in and

has a sense of what they would like the students to accomplish, have a framework

and stick to it. (Participant 2)

A great course is what the student brings to the course and what the instructor

brings…some people say that the professor is not the sage on the stage but the

sage by your side …but I think there has to be a mix…I want the professor to tell

me things I didn't know, guide me through things. (Participant 4)

In summary, 2 participants valued a structured framework of course delivery,

allowing them to situate the learning within the confines of what was originally set out as

the parameters for the experience.

To summarize, the participants in this study provided five major themes

that described a course they considered either to be of value to their learning or one which

they particularly enjoyed, in contrast to other characteristics which provided the opposite

experience. One of the criteria was specifically related to the role of the instructor and the

intentionality of the actions which could be taken by that individual to make the learning

experience a more positive one. The participants saw value in their acquisition of

knowledge, skills, or attitudes within a specific course, whereas enjoyment was

characterized as the appropriate use of teaching strategies to engage the students and

enhance the learning experience. The participants' comments reflected differences in

concept between satisfaction with the experience itself and the acquisition of knowledge

or understanding (learning). In addition, participants working in postsecondary

organizations appeared to be more sensitive to the challenges of instruction inherent in the

teaching of adults than those involved in either a business or primary/secondary school

environment. There seemed to be a contradiction between the need identified by the

participants for a structured framework within which a course was delivered and the need

for flexibility and adaptability of the instructor to respond to learner needs. Finally, those

participants who were at the penultimate stage of their Master's program identified more

program-related concerns than those in the earlier stages of the program.

Perceptions Regarding the Course/Instructor Evaluation Form

All of the participants in this study considered the existing course/instructor evaluation form to be one which did not adequately address their previously stated criteria, although all considered that the form included, to some extent, a number of elements which were important to them. The participants provided suggestions for change to better reflect the criteria which they had established to be of primary importance in the evaluation of courses and instructors.

The comments and concerns raised by the participants during the semistructured interviews concerning both the evaluation form and the evaluation process were captured in four main themes, some of which were characterized as the characteristics of the learning experience itself while others focussed on content, format, or process by which the evaluation of courses and instructors was conducted. The four themes included: the form itself; the role of the instructor; the evaluation process, and program-related issues.

The four main themes and subthemes inherent in each are listed in Table 3 Course/Instructor Evaluation: The Participants' Perspective. To better appreciate the breadth of the concerns identified as well as provide a graphic representation of the extent to which these concerns were reflected in the individual participant's interviews, Table 3 also identifies in which conversations these themes and subthemes were raised.

A more detailed discussion of the individual participant comments related to these four themes follows.

Table 3

Course/Instructor Evaluation: The Participants' Perspective

Themes Subthemes	P-1	P-2	P-3	P-4	P-5	P-6
The form itself						
Purpose and intent	X		X	X	X	X
Structure of the form	X	X	X	X	X	X
Relevance	X	X	X	X	X	X
Form to what is being assessed	X	X	X	X	X	X
Content to what is of interest to learner	X	X	X	X	X	
Inappropriateness of the Likert scale	X			X	X	X
Role of the instructor						
Diversity of teaching strategies	X	X	X	X	X	X
Instructor engagement	X	X	X		X	X
Tie learning to practice				X	X	
Creating opportunity for transformational learning	X	X	X		X	X
Instructor flexibility	X			X		X
The evaluation process						
Conflicting needs (program/instructor/student/institution)	X	X	X	X	X	X
Audience (for whom the information is intended)	X	X	X	X	X	X
Timing of the evaluation (formative vs. summative)	X	X	X	X	X	X
Program-related issues						
Instructor selection	X	X	X	X	X	
Course availability		X	X	X	X	X
Creativity in assignments	X			X	X	
Evaluation of internship, independent study, thesis advisor		X	X	X	X	
Program evaluation	X	X	X	X	X	X

The Form Itself.

The participants divided their comments concerning the evaluation form into three main areas–relevance (both to themselves and to the course); purpose (why the information was requested), and intent (how the information would be utilized) of the evaluation form; structure (how the form was designed and the information presented); and the appropriateness of the Likert scale.

Focusing on relevance. Throughout the findings, relevance was a recurring theme. Participants spoke of the relevance of their comments to the intended audience of the evaluation; relevance of the content of the course/instructor evaluation form to their needs as a learner; relevance and impact of the course/instructor evaluation to the instructor, to the course design, and to the department head; and relevance of the course/instructor evaluation to the assessment of overall program effectiveness.

I think relevance is one of the main issues with this questionnaire. Who are they talking about? Are they talking about teaching practice? Are they talking about you as an individual? So are you evaluating your own experience, or are you evaluating the experience as an example of good or bad teaching? (Participant 3)

The form seems very superficial. (Participant 6)

The instructor can make or break a course…it has not been separated in the evaluation, the impact of the instructor, because I think there is a huge impact of the instructor on the course. (Participant 5)

A number of participants identified the results of the course/instructor evaluation as an opportunity for the organization to share best practices based on the evaluation comments received. For example, in those instances where more than one instructor

teaches the same course, are effective teaching strategies highlighted by the students as making a positive contribution to the learning experience shared within the organization?

And there are things that they are doing in one course that they are not doing in another course, that could be transferred between the two groups…is there idea-sharing that needs to happen? We don't ask the deeper questions, but that is what really helps us make better decisions. That will help us make better courses. That will make the experience better. (Participant 5)

Others strongly advocated in favour of recognizing that the student is a consumer and suggested that their role was also to provide input on the courses, instructors, or program itself. They considered their impressions of their learning experience (whether it be positive, negative, or neutral) to be particularly relevant in the assessment of course satisfaction, instructor performance, and overall program delivery.

I am paying for these courses, and I'd like to have a voice in how things are done. It's almost like customer service, I guess. You know, I don't really want to think about it that way, but ultimately that's what it is. I mean, I want it to be a good experience for me and for others in the future, but if there are professors that are not doing a great job, I am going to let them know, and if they are doing a great job, I am going to let them know as well. (Participant 3)

Participant 4 expressed disappointment with learning situations where the instructor was not fully engaged in the process but felt that others in the class did not necessarily place the same importance on that concern. Although others may not have shared that concern, the participant argued that instructor engagement was of relevance to her evaluation criteria.

I have been laughed at in other classes…I say that I expect something from the professor.

Participant 2 illustrated the concept of value for money/time spent describing two very different learning experiences, both of which illustrated issues of potential relevance to the instructor or the department head.

I had a number of brilliant experiences. It was great. It was intelligent. It was wonderful. It was all those things; then the other two were disheartening …professors pulling up old PowerPoints that they had used at conferences and skipping over slides that were irrelevant instead of crafting something for us…and if this is what I am paying money for, you're kidding. (Participant 2)

In summary, the participants considered the issue of relevance on a number of levels including relevance of what was being taught to their own needs or interests, relevance of the evaluation form to the criteria of interest to the students, and relevance of the time and money spent to the value of the experience. The issue of value for money/time spent was a recurring theme throughout the interviews, in that the participants saw themselves as a consumer of a product or service for which a minimum standard of satisfaction should be established.

Clarifying purpose and intent. A number of participants suggested that the purpose and intent of the course/instructor evaluation should be clearly stated at the outset of the form. They expressed confusion on the meaning implied in wording of the questions or why the question itself was included in the course/instructor evaluation form.

I don't understand exactly why they are asking the question. (Participant 3)

Some expressed confusion with the audience for whom they should be addressing their comments.

> I know that there will be somebody collecting these [the evaluations], opening the envelope, maybe looking through them and maybe reading or not, and I also wrote with the professor in mind. I'm not sure whether they read the evaluations or not, but I hope that they do, so I keep that in mind too. (Participant 1)
>
> Probably could be feedback for the professor, the other part of it (the evaluation form) could be the feedback for people who have the power to update the course, change the course, and initiate change. (Participant 1)

Others questioned the relationship between the specific focus of the questions and the purpose for which the evaluation was intended. Although the evaluation form specified that student opinions were valued, there was no clarification of why the information was requested (its purpose), and there was no indication of how the information would be utilized by the organization (its intent).

> I am pretty sure that even if we would have said we hated the course, it would not have impacted anything. I think changing the form will show that [The University] is willing to actually pay attention to what is happening but also take action on it. ….if I really dislike a professor, maybe they need to do something to make it a better program…if they changed the form, they're saying we really care about what you say and we are going to do something about this; then they probably would get better feedback too. (Participant 5)
>
> I have always thought that it [the evaluation form] was at the convenience of the university. It's a way of checking up on their staff. I always looked at it, not that

the University was going to change this course, change the textbook, but it really

was a way of finding out what the instructor was doing in the classroom.

(Participant 6)

The course has to be evaluated because it gives good feedback whether the course

is effective and current. The instructor has to be evaluated to give them feedback

for a possible change and improvement. I think a constant evaluation is important

so that you do not get stuck with what's maybe outdated. (Participant 1)

Concerns with the form itself related to purpose and intent, with some participants

placing more emphasis on one aspect of the form over another. Whereas some

participants focussed more on the wording of specific questions, others suggested that the

evaluation criteria had little meaning for them.

It seems very superficial...the statements are not really applicable to my

[evaluation) criteria. (Participant 6)

Even though it looks statistical, it's still very, very subjective...there are no

objective parts to this. (Participant 4)

In summary, participants highlighted the importance of specifying why the

information on the evaluation form was requested (its purpose) and how the information

that was gathered would be used (its intent). In the absence of specificity around either,

the participants wondered at the value of the information obtained in the evaluation of the

learning experience.

Reorganizing the form's structure. Additional concerns were identified with how

the form was structured. Although a number of themes had been identified as important

to them when assessing whether a course was enjoyable or of value, the participants noted

that the lack of a structured approach limited an assessment along thematic lines– themes that they had suggested were key to course/instructor success. For example, they noted that themes such as instructor engagement, diversity of teaching strategies, evaluation, and feedback should be grouped to allow a more cohesive approach to the comments made or ratings provided. All participants indicated that they placed some importance on linking narrative comments to the Likert scale, suggesting that the placement of the narrative section at the end of the evaluation form discouraged learners from providing additional comments in support of the rating provided.

I think it should go by thematics. (Participant 6)

Prefer if the evaluation form was structured by some kind of theme or a heading with points underneath, and you could comment on that. (Participant 1)

I would probably have appreciated them to be grouped in themes rather than jumping all over the place…grouping the questions into themes, and at the top of each theme, put a title to it …so that you get a clear picture of what you are answering and what their concern is with offering you these questions. (Participant 3)

I would look at [evaluation]; did the course meet your expectations, did it match the course calendar, did it match what you thought you were getting into and then go into a separate section on delivery, assignments. (Participant 4)

Make categories. Categories for instructor, for content, for readings, for presentations…and give it early so that students can make notes throughout. I think that would provide reams of good quantitative and qualitative feedback about the program and the instructor. (Participant 2)

When I look at this and evaluate the questionnaire, it's…a little bit all over the place. (Participant 1)

In summary, participants expressed the desire for the form to have a more specific structure, tied to like criteria or themes, to assist them in providing additional, more focussed, and specific comments.

Insufficiency of Likert scale responses. Some participants suggested that the use of a Likert scale alone did not provide sufficient information to reflect the actual learning experience. They felt that there was a tendency for students to assign the same numerical rating with little or no thought given to the rationale behind that rating. There was a further suggestion that student lack of interest or attention to the evaluation process could skew the results such that any conclusions made on the basis of the information obtained may be unreliable.

I don't give it a lot of thought. It is usually given at a time when someone is waiting for them…I just circle numbers…I don't want to have too many 5s because it looks like you didn't think about it. I don't want to give too many 2s because I don't want to get anyone in trouble. (Participant 4)

I don't like scales that are 5. I just find it gives people an easy option…you can sit in the middle of the road… so it allows you to sit on the fence. …you need to have an opportunity to put why, why would you [give that rating]. (Participant 5)

It's almost a circling game…pick between disagree and strongly agree, and I never go lower than that. (Participant 1)

They have done something that is very easy to score, by numbering everything. ...if we were asked to write a paragraph or two about the course, they might learn more from reading that than this [form]. (Participant 6)

I would be tempted to add more to the comment section, just to clarify what my experience was like. The comments section was, for me, more meaningful than the actual questions. (Participant 3)

In summary, all of the participants considered the Likert scale to be an insufficient measure of course/instructor satisfaction, suggesting that students needed an opportunity to provide comments to explain why they rated a course or instructor in a certain way. By providing comments in support of the ratings given, it was suggested that the evaluation results would be more meaningful for the audience for whom the information was intended.

To summarize, the participants in this study found the evaluation form to be somewhat inconsistent with their identified needs or criteria for the evaluation of courses or instructors. Some identified concerns with the content, others with the purpose or the structure of the form, and all expressed concerns with the nature of the evaluation process. Nonetheless, the participants considered their individual participation in the course/instructor evaluation process to be important.

Highlighting the Role of the Instructor

The role of the instructor was considered to be critical to the success of any course by all of the participants and consequently identified as a key component of the course/instructor evaluation. Diversity of teaching strategies designed to engage the learner, evidence of instructor engagement in the learning process, the ability to tie

learning to practice and create opportunities for transformational learning, as well as flexibility were the main criteria which participants considered necessary for inclusion in the evaluation form,

Participant satisfaction with the course/instructor evaluation form focussed on those questions that elicited comments concerning the instructor's role in the learning process. Although weaknesses may have been evident in the structure, readings, or format of the course, these concerns were seen to be minimized by the effectiveness of the individual instructor. Conversely, evaluations of courses in which the content and structure were clearly stated and followed and for which the readings were linked to course objectives were negatively impacted by instructors who did not demonstrate key characteristics which the research participants had identified as critical to their needs– instructor engagement, flexibility and adaptability, and opportunity for self-reflection.

I'm assuming if the instructor is teaching the course, he or she is current in the profession and knows what they are teaching, so I would evaluate their method of delivering the course and the interaction with students. (Participant 1)

I've heard some student say course X was the best class ever, but I suspect if you had someone else teach it outside of Professor Y, you would probably not get the same results, because a lot of that is the teacher….so the particular professor that is running the class has a huge influence on it. But some aspects of the program, like the learning journals, are repeatable and effective as well. (Participant 5)

A good instructor can make a difficult course manageable…and a good course can go terribly wrong with a poor instructor. (Participant 4)

The success of a particular course was also tied to the transformative process in which the learners, through the experience, gained new insight or understanding of themselves within the context of the knowledge or understanding gained through the course. A number of participants found the transformative process to be an important criterion against which the role of the instructor in the success of the learning experience should be evaluated.

And this professor …reinvigorates my faith. … that academic integrity, I am sure I am going to find it, because I have found it. (Participant 2)

Certainly classes that have been transformative for me…I think sometimes I wasn't always aware of it …until after you actually go through the process. Then you realize, wow, what happened? (Participant 6)

The participants observed that the evaluation form did contain many elements which were related to the assessment of the instructor, however expressed frustration with how the lack of an organized, structured, thematic approach to the course/instructor form impeded their ability to provide thoughtful feedback.

Could be grouped under my personal growth, and then you could break it up in reflection, increase of knowledge, individual growth. (Participant 1)

I would have probably appreciated them to be grouped in themes rather than …jumping around all over the place. (Participant 3)

Specific suggestions were made on grouping questions along similar thematic lines related to instructor engagement, use of teaching strategies, flexibility, and adaptability to assist in capturing evaluative comments related specifically to the role of the instructor.

I think they should look at some of these questions. Isn't there a way that we could put some of them together? ….expectations were both reasonable and appropriate; along with that you could add the professor was flexible in terms of timelines. (Participant 6)

The professor encouraged student ownership, and selfdirection is kind of the same as the instructor allowed for individual growth. (Participant 1)

There are nonsubjective things…did we meet our goals, were the assignments easy to understand, laid out which are task oriented, specific to the course. Then you have got instructor-kind of things. Did they create an environment of respect and trust? And if you do it that way, you can pull out what's specific to the instructor versus what is specific to the course. (Participant 5)

In summary, the participants considered that the existing course/instructor evaluation form did include elements which were congruent between what they had identified as important characteristics in a positive learning experience and what they saw in the existing course/instructor evaluation form. These elements included instructional engagement, flexibility, the use of a variety of instructional strategies, and the opportunity for transformational learning. What remained frustrating to the participants and was identified as a major flaw to the form was the lack of a structured, cohesive approach to capturing that information. Participants provided specific suggestions on how common elements could be grouped together or eliminated to provide a more focussed and relevant level of input by the students along thematic lines. The participants further suggested that by restructuring the evaluation form, there would be a clearer delineation between what facet of the learning experience was actually being assessed– the course or the instructor.

Broadening the Evaluation Process

All participants noted concerns with the absence of a comprehensive evaluation process aimed at capturing information at the formative, summative, and program levels. Three participants recalled an experience they had in courses where the instructor requested feedback midway through the term. In two instances the instructor made some shifts in the course to accommodate that feedback; in the other, no changes were made.

It is all about feedback and willingness to do something with the feedback, and some of the professors are just great and some of them just don't care. This is the way I have been doing it for 10 years and this is the way it is going to happen. And you know that this person doesn't want feedback, so I wouldn't want to spend my time and energy putting thought and effort where someone doesn't really want the feedback. (Participant 5)

So you are writing something that you hope the next person benefits and I think there should be something earlier…if it [evaluation] could be established earlier on, maybe some of the course could be salvaged. (Participant 4)

I think that having that formative approach throughout, perhaps having that feedback halfway through the course, would be beneficial. (Participant 2)

How the evaluation process was conducted was also highlighted by a number of participants.

It's bizarre…I find it very weird. To be perfectly honest, I think it should be handed out as part of the course notes that you receive the very first day. (Participant 5)

I learned from my very first course that it is good to have one evaluation in the

middle of the course and one at the end, so two evaluations. If something sticks

out like a sore thumb and something is not right, you still have time to adjust it,

and then the last one would be the final wrap-up. (Participant 1)

Should be a much more open process where there is discussion involved. I have

had professors say that they actually would prefer not to leave the room because

they would like to have the feedback. (Participant 4)

Some frustration was also expressed by participants who noted that the manner in

which the evaluation process was conducted did not provide sufficient time to think about

what comments one might wish to include in the evaluation.

We're expected to reflect throughout the entire program, and we don't get a

chance to be reflective here. (Participant 5)

I would enjoy a bit longer reflection, just to write a serious or thoughtful comment.

(Participant 1)

A number of participants expressed surprise that the university did not solicit

feedback from students regarding their experience with internship, independent study, and

thesis proposal courses, suggesting that criteria they had identified as important to the

learning process–instructor engagement, flexibility and adaptability, importance of

instructor were also relevant.

I was never asked to fill out one of these [evaluations] for my internship or for my

independent study…and I was not happy with my independent study…no way to

formally address that. (Participant 4)

Have you had any guidance, or have you had a chance to meet with your advisor?
(Participant 4)

I didn't get a lot of guidance getting into the program…so it did make my thesis
work a little harder. (Participant 5)

In summary, the participants highlighted the need for a more structured evaluation
process which would occur not only at the end of each course but at the midpoint as well
in order that instructors could gain some insight into how the students perceived the
learning experience. In addition, participants questioned the value of an evaluation
process which was timed in such a way that the instructor was unable to make any
changes because the course had ceased.

Program-Related Issues

Participants noted a number of concerns regarding course availability, selection of
course instructors, and lack of creativity in assignments as issues which were not
addressed in the evaluation form and which many participants considered to be of
importance to the evaluation of the overall Master of Education program experience. In
addition, some participants expressed frustration with the absence of adult education
content in course options.

I was more interested in adult education, so there were times it was very difficult

to read material that was not in adult education but having to constantly look at it

for an adult ed. perspective. That was interesting but frustrating at the same time.

So I appreciate courses that offered some content in adult education. (Participant

3)

I have to look at it and say, did I learn something that I can take back to my work that will help me do my job better? (Participant 5)

The independent and internship I really took because I could not find anything else, which I am not overly happy about because it ends up that you just take what you can instead of what you need or what you want. (Participant 4)

Because the Master's is all about culminating in a research interest, whether it be a project or thesis, then I think in terms of the course work there has to be flexibility for you to adapt your assignments to support that end piece. (Participant 4)

Concerns with instructor selection were apparent at all locations in which courses were delivered. Some concerns related to difficulties in having courses taught by part-time or sessional instructors. Participants noted that some instructors lacked sufficient experience in teaching or did not demonstrate the depth of knowledge they had hoped to enjoy. In contrast, a number of participants highlighted experiences where they considered the behaviour and/or engagement of an experienced, full-time instructor to be less than satisfactory.

So when they just sit down and say...let's do four presentations today, ...I feel I could just phone it in, basically do an on-line course. ...we went in and we listened to people talk about things that were ridiculous and we went home. (Participant 4)

[The instructor] was very knowledgeable in his subject, ...however he lost at stimulating an interesting learning environment. (Participant 1)

The instructor wasn't very experienced...very, very nervous, not comfortable with

the content or the students. (Participant 3)

There was a groundswell of dissatisfaction...one student quit, and her professor

tried to entice her in by saying just do the paper, I will give you an A. (Participant

2)

Other participants expressed concerns regarding course availability, particularly

courses in locations outside of the main campus.

There were some courses I would have loved to take, but they were never offered

anywhere that was convenient off site...it wasn't available off campus.

(Participant 5)

There wasn't much variety in Location 1...Location 3. (Participant 3)

Course selection has been based on what is available. Very rarely is there a

choice. (Participant 1)

All participants had concerns with the absence of program feedback at the end of

the Master's experience and suggested that their comments could be useful to the

university in enriching the experience for future students.

I would like to be asked to comment on the program–have you found that you

have received any guidance, or have you had a chance to meet with your advisor?

Do you find that the course offered meets your needs? There needs to be

something for the program, an evaluation that we do not get to give. The Master's

program is not supposed to be a number of independent modules coupled together.

(Participant 4)

And there is a problem with that, I would strongly state that if you do part time, only take one course a semester, but the requirements are to do it in 5 years, and you can't do it in 5 years and take one course a semester and not take a course in the summer. It is not possible. It is hard to do work full time and do this within the time frame. (Participant 5)

In summary, program-related concerns included the absence of the opportunity to provide evaluation on the entire Master of Education program and the lack of feedback mechanisms for internship, independent study, and thesis proposal courses. In addition, a number of participants expressed some frustration with the quality of instructors, the availability of courses, and the absence of adult education content at the Masters' level.
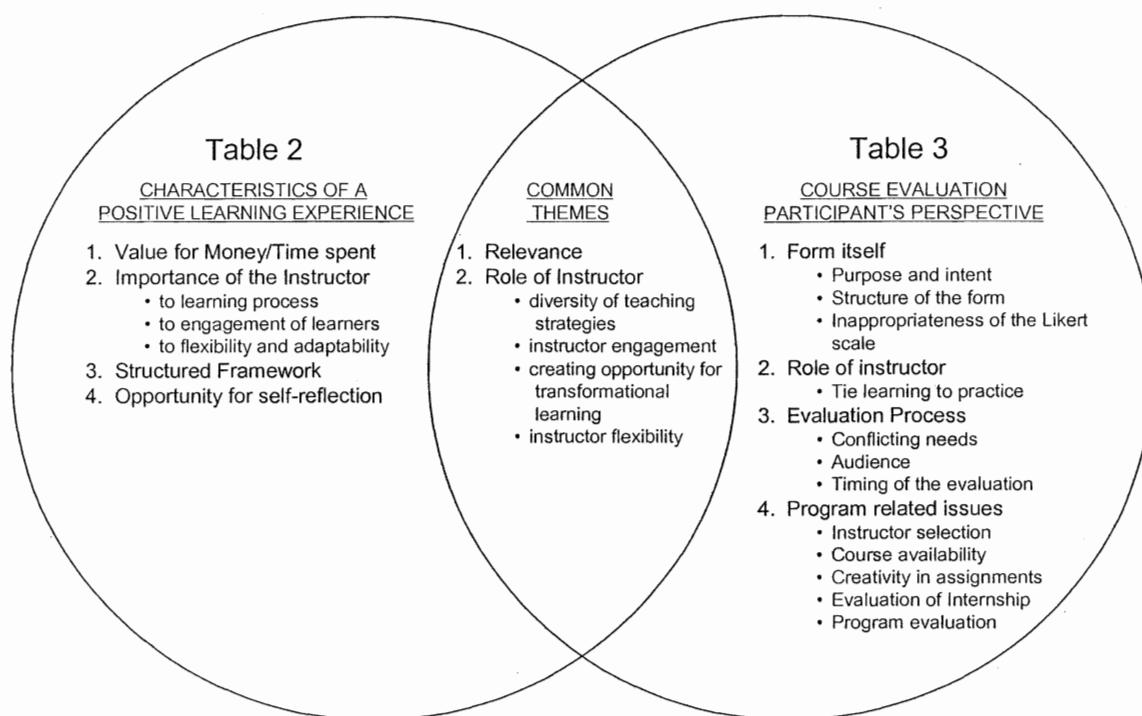
To summarize, from the discussion with the participants, four main themes emerged which reflected the participants' assessment of how the existing instructor/course evaluation form met or did not meet what they considered to be important or relevant to them as a part-time graduate student. The participants questioned the relevance of their assessment to the evaluation of course content, instructor performance, and the organization's unstated purpose for the form. In addition, the participants questioned the relevance of their comments to the various audiences for whom the information was provided, as they were unable to discern the impact of their comments or ratings. A great deal of emphasis was placed on the role of the instructor, which all participants saw as pivotal to a successful, positive learning experience. There were also similarities in the manner in which the participants characterized the role of the instructor and their initial identification of the characteristics of a positive learning experience.

Although the instructor/course evaluation instrument was not initially identified by any of the students as a characteristic of a positive learning experience, it was evident from the findings that the existing format was seen by all as an impediment to effective evaluation. As a result, the participants tended to offer suggestions on how additional congruency could be made between what they considered to be important in the evaluation of courses and how the evaluation form should be restructured to capture those themes. The study highlighted that there was some lack of congruency with the structure, format, timing, and content of the evaluation form with what the participants identified as important or relevant to them in the course/instructor evaluation process. Further, there was a unanimous belief that the evaluation process should be expanded to include elements of formative, summative, and program evaluation.

Congruency Between Participant Needs and Course/Instructor Evaluation Form

Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of the congruency between what the participants identified as important or relevant to the graduate learning experience and those characteristics which they identified as already present in the current course/instructor evaluation form. The left side of the Venn diagram lists four of the five characteristics identified by the participants as ones which they considered to be inherent in a positive learning experience at the Master's level. The right side of the diagram lists the four major themes with accompanying subthemes which reflect the perspectives of the participants concerning the existing course/instructor evaluation form and the evaluation process. The central part of the Venn diagram presents those themes and

Table 2

CHARACTERISTICS OF A
POSITIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

1. Value for Money/Time spent
2. Importance of the Instructor
   - to learning process
   - to engagement of learners
   - to flexibility and adaptability
3. Structured Framework
4. Opportunity for self-reflection

COMMON
THEMES

1. Relevance
2. Role of Instructor
   - diversity of teaching strategies
   - instructor engagement
   - creating opportunity for transformational learning
   - instructor flexibility

Table 3

COURSE EVALUATION
PARTICIPANT'S PERSPECTIVE

1. Form itself
   - Purpose and intent
   - Structure of the form
   - Inappropriateness of the Likert scale
2. Role of instructor
   - Tie learning to practice
3. Evaluation Process
   - Conflicting needs
   - Audience
   - Timing of the evaluation
4. Program related issues
   - Instructor selection
   - Course availability
   - Creativity in assignments
   - Evaluation of Internship
   - Program evaluation

Figure 1. Congruency between criteria for a positive learning experience and participant

perspectives of current course/instructor evaluation form.

subthemes which were common to all of the participants, that is, which criteria were felt by all to be essential in a positive learning experience–relevance and the role of the instructor.

The role of the instructor included teaching and learning strategies designed to engage the learner, instructor engagement in the learning process itself, and the opportunity for transformational learning experiences through self-reflection or reflection-in-action. Relevance appeared to the participants to be the link between themselves and the learning experience; course content and their own learning needs; evaluation criteria and actual experience; and course content and course objectives. Although each of the participants considered the issue of relevance somewhat differently, it became a recurring theme that permeated all of the conversations and tended to personalize their individual experiences. Although visually it would appear that there is a lack of congruency between the needs identified by the participants and those which they identified as important to the learning experience, the importance of the instructor to the overall enjoyment or value that the student placed on the learning experience is significant. Other criteria, while no less important, involved administrative, procedural, or process issues, for which the participants offered some suggestions for improvement.

Summary

The purpose of this research study was to determine whether there was a link between what part-time Master of Education students consider to be important or relevant to them in the learning they experienced through courses taken towards completion of their graduate degree and the course/instructor evaluation form provided at the end of each course. Participants were asked to identify their perceptions of the existing

course/evaluation form and assess how the criteria they had identified as important may or may not be reflected in the evaluation form itself.

The findings would indicate that there are a number of common criteria in the evaluation of course/instructor performance. The participants highlighted instructor engagement, flexibility, and instructional ability as key factors in assessing the learning experience–criteria which were present in the existing course/instructor evaluation instrument. The opportunity for self-reflection or reflection-in-action was also considered to be an important criterion in assessing course/instructor performance, which was reflected in the comments of the participants regarding the role of the instructor.

Concerns regarding the content, format, and intent of the evaluation form were identified by all participants, as was the concept of relevance of the information that the evaluation was designed to capture to their own criteria. These latter concerns were not initially raised by the students in their articulation of what they considered to be important in the assessment of the characteristics of a positive learning experience. However, these concerns indicate that the participants felt that the evaluation process should not be restricted to a form distributed at the end of a course. Chapter Five provides some implications of these findings for theory, practice, and future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there was a link between what part-time Master of Education students considered to be important in the assessment of a positive learning experience and the evaluation criteria contained in the "course/instructor" evaluations distributed at the end of each course. As the content of those evaluation forms often reflects elements related to both the performance of the instructor and the course content itself, the dual term "instructor/course" evaluation has been used for the purposes of this study. By inquiring into the criteria for course or instructor satisfaction and comparing those criteria to the evaluation instrument, I identified the specific elements which reflected what part-time students considered important or relevant criteria to the evaluation process or, alternatively, lacked congruency with them.

Summary of the Study

The study was conducted using a qualitative research model. A semistructured interview process was used to elicit information from 6 part-time students registered in the Master of Education program. All 6 students had completed a minimum of three courses towards their graduate degree and were representative of the three locations at which courses were offered. Using information provided by the participants, a number of themes were generated to reflect what the students considered to be important criteria in their evaluation of courses and instructors. Those themes were compared to what participants perceived were contained in the existing evaluation instrument students complete at the end of each course. Differences and similarities in perspectives between satisfaction with the course and the instructor and the criteria contained in the existing

course/instructor evaluation instrument formed the basis upon which the findings were articulated.

Although significant concerns were raised on the format, content, intent, and timing of the evaluation process, there were a number of congruencies identified, particularly with respect to instructor engagement, interest, flexibility and adaptability, and the importance of the opportunity for self-reflection or reflection-in-action. (In other words, these criteria were considered important by the study participants, and they were found in the current evaluation.) The opportunity to participate in a learning environment which provided a diversity of teaching strategies was seen as a key component to instructor satisfaction. Although the participants felt that criterion was reflected in the course/instructor evaluation form, they observed that the absence of a structured format to capture specific information on that criterion was a weakness of the evaluation instrument.

In addition to issues of format, structure, and content of the evaluation form itself, the participants expressed specific concerns with the intent and timing of the evaluation process, suggesting that the existing process leaves no opportunity for change or improvement to the learning experience. The participants linked these concerns to the concept of value for money or time spent. The concepts of formative evaluation (midway through the course) and program evaluation (once all program requirements, including the thesis, were met) were specific recommendations made by the participants to improve the effectiveness of the evaluation process.

Discussion

The results of this study would indicate that part-time Master of Education students consider the evaluation process to be a valuable part of their learning experience

on both a surface and a deep level. In addition, the findings would indicate that the students consider that they have a role to play in participating in a meaningful evaluation process both during and at the end of each course in addition to providing their overall comments on the Master of Education program itself. In the latter instance, it was clear from the comments made by the participants that they felt they had a vested interest in providing feedback on their overall experience of the program. Program concerns were not limited to observations on availability of course selections or assignments set by instructors but included some thoughtful insights on the need for evaluation of faculty advisors and thesis advisors as well as experiences with courses involving independent study and internship.

Although the background and work experience of the participants varied, they all suggested that some level of formative evaluation be conducted midway through the course. This feedback was considered to be important to the instructor concerning the aspects of the course which the students found positive in the learning experience and the areas which they considered problematic. Using the concept of "the student as consumer," all considered that the absence of opportunity to provide this level of focussed and thoughtful comments was an inherent weakness in the evaluation process conducted by the university.

Another key issue that surfaced was the lack of clarity around the audience for whom the course/instructor evaluation was intended and a desire by the participants that the university clarify how and for what purposes the evaluation was to be used. Suggestions were advanced on reworking the document to provide a more focussed ability to capture information specifically related to both the instructor and the course. All

agreed that the form needed to be redesigned to provide opportunities for comment in support of the numeric rating provided.

Finally, the primary focus of the participants' comments related to what Pratt describes as the "deep elements" of evaluation (Pratt, 1998). Although there was an acknowledgement that there may be issues of interest to students around course design, content and objectives, organization, and assessment criteria, the participants were primarily concerned with the personal qualities of the instructor and how they related to the teaching and learning experience. The acknowledgement by the participants of the need for separation of the surface (duty-based) elements of evaluation from the deep approaches to evaluation (Pratt) within the context of the evaluation process is a key result of this study. It suggests the need for the university to offer a variety of evaluation tools designed to meet the different audiences which are the focus of the process, whether they be instructors, curriculum designers, faculty heads of programs, or the students themselves.

As stated previously, limited research has been conducted on the evaluation process in the context of part-time graduate students. This study indicates that graduate students are more preoccupied in the evaluation process with issues concerning instructor engagement and the diversity of instructional strategies, as other authors had previously discovered (Beran & Violato, 2005; Ross-Gordon, 2003). In addition, the results of this study confirmed findings of previous studies, that is, that graduate students believe that a formative evaluation process provides information which assists the instructor to realign the learning process to more effectively meet the needs of the participants while maintaining program or content requirements (Chen et al., 2003; Nesheim et al, 2006).

The need for a structured framework as well as instructor engagement were key criteria identified by the participants of this study, which would also seem to confirm the conclusions reached in the study conducted by Gursoy and Umbreit (2005). Finally, the manner by which the evaluation is conducted (format of the form, use of narrative as opposed to numeric evaluation scales) is consistent with previous research findings (Centra, 1979; E. Cohen, 2005; Saunders & Williams, 2005; Seldin, 1984).

The suggestions by the participants of ways in which the evaluation process could be improved lend credence to the suggestions by Nesheim et al. (2006) that more efforts need to be made by postsecondary institutions to clarify the intent, purpose, and potential results of the evaluation process. In addition, the suggestions by the participants in this study on how the evaluation form could be structured, including areas on which they feel that they have the expertise to comment, builds on the findings that students desire a more focussed approach to evaluation (Saroyan & Amundsen, 2001; Sprague & Massoni, 2005) linked to the course or program itself.

Although this study was limited to participants within the Master of Education program, the results suggest that similar findings could be evident in other graduate programs where students are provided with only one opportunity to assess the learning they have experienced.

Power Dynamics Revealed by the Study: Analysis Through a Critical Perspective

Within the critical perspective comes the chance to reflect upon the analysis of the patterns and themes that have emerged, what Pratt (1998) describes as being able to "get people to look more closely at what they know and examine more carefully their common

sense understandings about the content" (p. 251). As stated previously, there is an opportunity in critical reflection to question one's assumptions and practices in adult education (Merriam, 2001) to further develop the theory that has been developed from the emergent data.

The results of this study indicate that there is a shift in power which occurs throughout the evaluation process at all three levels, formative, summative and program-related. As stated in Chapter One, the notion of power is key to the critical perspective, and it appears from the data that there are differences in understanding where power is situated, depending upon how one views the roles of the individuals within the evaluation process. Figure 2: Power Dynamics provides a graphic representation of where power potentially resides for each of the three types of evaluation- formative, summative and program. If one considers power as a continuum, where individuals exercise power at different times during the process, the potential impact of that power dynamic shifts. In addition, the individual choice of when or how to exercise one's power has an impact on how other individuals or organizations in that continuum subsequently exercise or choose to exercise their own power. Figure 2 also highlights how the study reflected where students considered their power to rest at the formative, summative and program levels.

Power is reflected in the choice by the students to provide substantive or meaningful feedback at the formative and summative level – a choice which may be based on how they perceive that the organization values that feedback and implements changes
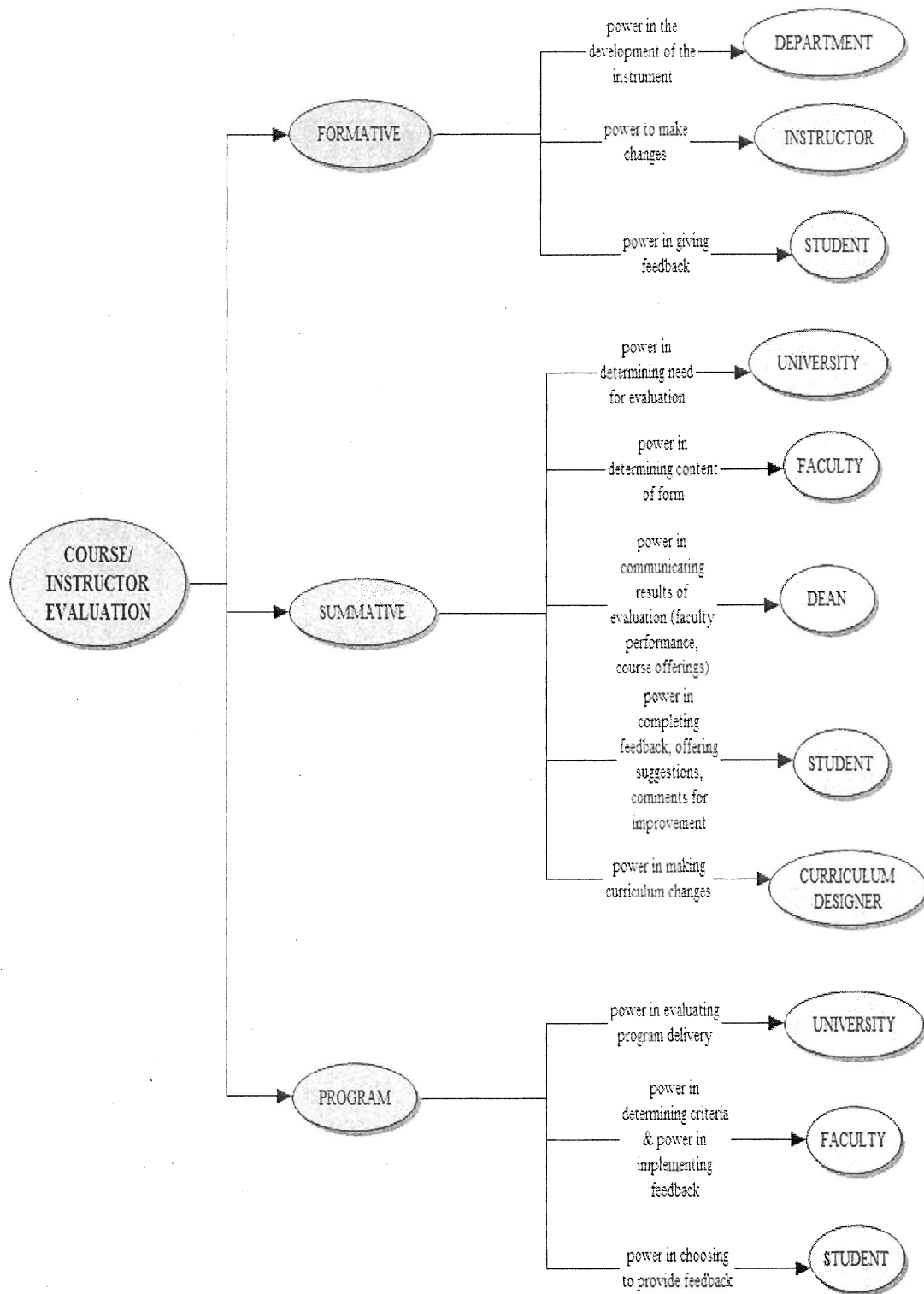
Figure 2: Power Dynamics: The Evaluation Continuum

which are reflective of the comments provided. At the program level, power is reflected in the opportunity given by the organization and subsequently taken by the students to offer suggestions, comments for improvement which would ultimately improve the overall graduate experience.

Although the issue of power has been covered in Chapter One these dynamics are being restated in order to better situate what the study has added to our understanding of the context of the course/instructor evaluation form seen through the eyes of Master of Education students. One could argue that those who create the evaluation instrument have the power, as the format, content, and structure of the evaluation have been generated by the organization which makes the decisions for faculty tenure and salary increases on the basis of student evaluations. Further, as previously indicated, instructor selection and assignment are affected by the information obtained from the evaluation form, and decisions are taken concerning course content and availability based on the feedback from students. The results of the study would indicate that students are both cognisant of the power inherent in the actual development of the evaluation instrument (the content, structure and selection of criteria against which the course and/or instructor is evaluated) and aware of the potential impact or value of their comments (or absence of same) within the evaluation process.

Similarly, one could argue that power resides in the individual who completes the evaluation instrument, when thoughtful or substantive comments result in subsequent decisions concerning faculty performance or course content. Conversely, in the absence of substantive comments, does the power shift to the instructor? Does an absence of constructive feedback result in the instructor's perception that the students' learning

experience was positive? The difficulty in the articulation of each of these arguments is that they remain only assumptions of where power actually resides in the evaluation process. These questions which emerged from the analysis of the power dynamics through a critical perspective reflect the ongoing tension between the various stages of the evaluation process and are demonstrative of the paradox between the purpose and intent of the evaluation instrument and its overall effectiveness in the assessment of course and/or instructor performance.

From a critical perspective, the results of the study indicate that the participants did want a voice in the evaluation of both the course and the instructor. However, the participants wanted that feedback to be expressed at different times in the learning process–times when they considered it to be more relevant to their own needs or interests. For example, the participants of this study considered their assessment of the learning experience to be critical at the midpoint of the course in order that necessary changes could be made by the course instructor to either the teaching strategies or the learning experience. In other words, the power rested with the students to provide input and feedback, but they felt that the power shifted to the instructor for the acknowledgement and potential implementation of corrective action designed to address any shortcomings highlighted.

All of the participants recognized that the intent of the summative course evaluation was tied to the organization's assessment of course/instructor performance. However they might have disagreed on the content of the evaluation instrument, all considered that any input they provided would be too late to effect a positive change to their own learning experience. Conversely, the students did recognize that the evaluation

can be tied to the promotion or tenure process with the result that they did have a certain amount of power in voicing their positive or negative opinions of the instructor. In contrast, there was a recognition that some level of evaluation needed to be provided to those in a decision-making authority concerning whether the conduct and content of the course met the needs of the students enrolled in the course. Consequently, the students felt that power rests with the faculty to develop appropriate instruments designed to elicit specific information, shifts to the students in determining the extent to which they participate in the evaluation process on a substantive or superficial level, then shifts back to the faculty, the dean or department head to provide feedback to both instructors and potentially curriculum designers concerning the evaluation comments received.

The issue of program evaluation or student satisfaction with the entire graduate program experience is a recurring theme throughout the study and reflects the voice that students feel they must have to evaluate the value of the time and money spent against the teaching and learning experiences they enjoyed. Neisham et al.(2006) discuss the notion of power within the academic setting, suggesting that there is a tendency to focus on policies, programs, and practices of full-time students at the undergraduate level. This study provided an expression of a voice that seems to be relatively unheard in academic settings, the voice of part-time graduate students. These adult learners are indicating that they would like some power in influencing decisions that affect their programs. Ultimately it is the organization to which this information is provided that has the power to determine what weight should be given to the feedback received. However, the opportunity for feedback also gives voice to the students to reflect on the time that they

have spent on the journey towards their Master of Education and the substantive changes that could be made as a result of that evaluation.

The results of this study provide further understanding of how power shifts within the context of the evaluation process at the formative, summative and program level. Depending upon the level of evaluation, the impact of student feedback is maximized or diminished with more immediate or visible results possible at the formative level. Notwithstanding the part-time nature of the their status, this study reflects the understanding of the participants of the existing power dynamics within the evaluation process in a graduate setting and indicates their continued desire to give voice to their comments and concerns at all three levels of evaluation.

Recommendations

There are four main recommendations which I believe flow from the results of this research study, dealing with the format or structure of the form itself, the nature and intent of the evaluation process, and the potential applicability of these findings within the graduate studies program.

Specifically, based on the findings, I recommend:

1. That the university's Faculty of Education consider restructuring the evaluation process to give graduate students the opportunity to provide evaluations at the formative, summative, and program levels. As the ultimate goal of the graduate studies program in the Faculty of Education is to "improve the professional competence of practitioners and researchers" (The University, 2006a), student comments could be valuable to instructors and the

department chair in the Faculty as well as contribute to the overall assessment of program delivery.

2. That the course/instructor evaluation form be reconfigured to group similar items under different sections, with additional space provided in each section for narrative comments. Further, some thought needs to be given to what elements should be included in the course/instructor evaluation form and what elements would be best included in a program evaluation instrument.

3. That the University's Faculty of Education identify the intent or purpose of the course/instructor evaluation form and provide additional clarity or definition to the elements that the students are asked to evaluate.

4. That additional study be conducted on how the findings of this study could be applied to other graduate programs within the university with the intent of improving the value and relevance of the information solicited and obtained through course/instructor evaluations.

Limitations

Although the findings demonstrate that there is a consistency in the importance the 6 adults interviewed for this study place on the teacher as instructor in the evaluation process, the focus of this study concerned one specific graduate program which utilized a particular evaluation instrument. Other graduate programs may utilize different instruments which better address the criteria that the participants identified as important to them for "course/instructor" evaluations. Other programs may also have implemented formative or summative evaluations as part of their delivery model. Consequently, the

results of this study and the recommendations advanced may not be applicable outside the Master of Education program.

The selection of participants, several of whom were known to the researcher, could be considered to have influenced in either a positive or negative way the data that were elicited. However, with the exception of one individual, none of the participants have an ongoing relationship with the researcher and could be considered as acquaintances only. In addition, the rigour associated with qualitative analysis, and specifically grounded theory, requires that the data "earn its way" (Charmaz, 2000) into the analysis. The quality control exercised by the use of a different coder confirmed that the themes that were generated by the researcher were consistent with the voices of the participants.

Implications for Further Research

Given that the criteria for participant selection in this study required individuals to have completed a minimum of three courses towards completion of their Master of Education, further research opportunities exist to compare and contrast what students consider important at the outset of the Masters program with the criteria valued by learners at the penultimate stage of the program. In addition, additional research on the differences between the criteria established by students from different occupational backgrounds may prove insightful. There appeared, from this study, to be some differences in what individuals considered important criteria in course/instructor evaluation dependent upon whether the participant came from a business, postsecondary, or primary school background. Further research with a different cohort or in other

programs within other faculties may also offer insights on the criteria graduate students consider as important or relevant in the assessment of their learning experience.

The Nesheim et al. (2006) study suggests that postsecondary institutions' policies, procedures, and practices focus primarily on full-time students. Consequently, the results of this study would indicate that there is an opportunity for further exploration of the differences in the importance part-time graduate students place on course/instructor evaluation and the potential impact on the evaluation instruments (policies, procedures, and practices) with which universities assess individual instructor, course, and/or program performance.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate to me that the participants placed a high value on the evaluation of their learning experience at the Masters' level within the Graduate program in The University's Faculty of Education program. In addition, the results point to the feeling of the participants that they had a significant role to play to ensure that they contributed to the assessment of courses and instructors at both the detailed course level and the general program level. Were these concerns and observations linked to the knowledge, skills, or understanding that they had acquired while in the program? I believe they were. Were the comments and suggestions linked to the employment maturity of the participants? It is impossible to say, as the study did not address the number of years the participants had been employed, nor did it provide any details regarding their work profile. All participants did, however, comment on their attempts to balance the demands of work with the demands presented by school and in their daily lives. Their comments also reflected an understanding of the impacts of a positive

learning experience on the time, energy, and resources that they needed to pursue graduate level studies on a part-time basis.

The value placed on the findings of this study and how the recommendations are considered within the context of the Faculty of Education remains an important piece of this study for me. I am not suggesting that these six voices are the only ones which should be heard. However, if the Faculty wishes to address the current course/instructor evaluation process, the thoughtful, insightful, constructive, and critical analysis evident in the participants' comments should not be ignored.

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Appendix A

Faculty of Education Course/Instructor Evaluation Form

Course Title and Number:

Instructor:

Please read each statement and circle the response that best summarizes your thoughts or viewpoint. Also, feel free to comment on any aspects of the course that you appreciated. **Your opinions are valued.**

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

1. The objectives of the course were clearly stated. 1 2 3 4 5

2. The instructor was knowledgeable in this subject. 1 2 3 4 5

3. The instructor demonstrated respect and interest in students. 1 2 3 4 5

4. A stimulating, interesting learning environment was created. 1 2 3 4 5

5. This course connects theory to practical applications. 1 2 3 4 5

6. The instructor was flexible in terms of timelines. 1 2 3 4 5

7. Expectations and workload were reasonable and appropriate 1 2 3 4 5

8. The course was well paced. 1 2 3 4 5

9. The handout materials enriched the course content. 1 2 3 4 5

10. The instructor encouraged students to inquire, question and reflect. 1 2 3 4 5

11. The evaluation criteria were fair. 1 2 3 4 5

12. I received feedback during the course based on my assignments. 1 2 3 4 5

13. The instructor was prompt in returning my assignments.   1   2   3   4   5

14. The instructor was accessible to students.   1   2   3   4   5

15. I learned a great deal in this course.   1   2   3   4   5

16. The course content is current and relevant.   1   2   3   4   5

17. The instructor has established good rapport with students in this course.   1   2   3   4   5

18. The instructor allowed for individual growth.   1   2   3   4   5

19. My knowledge in this subject area has increased.   1   2   3   4   5

20. The instructor encouraged student ownership and self direction.   1   2   3   4   5

COMMENTS

Appendix B

Research Ethics Board Approval

Brock University

Office of Research Services
Research Ethics Office
St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1
T: 905-688-5550, Ext. 3035/4876 F: 905-688-0748

www.brocku.ca

DATE: July 24, 2007

FROM: Michelle McGinn, Chair
            Research Ethics Board (REB)

Michelle K. M'C

TO: Denise Paquette Frenette, Education
            Carolyn BROWN

FILE: 06-372 BROWN

TITLE: Course/Instructor Evaluation: Perspectives of Part-time Graduate Students

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The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

DECISION: Accepted as clarified

This project has received ethics clearance for the period of July 24, 2007 to December 30, 2007 subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board's next scheduled meeting. The clearance period may be extended upon request. *The study may now proceed.*

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and cleared by the REB. During the course of research no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol, recruitment, or consent form may be initiated without prior written clearance from the REB. The Board must provide clearance for any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to http://www.brocku.ca/researchservices/forms to complete the appropriate form **Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application.**

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form **Continuing Review/Final Report** is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.

MM/bb

Appendix C

Semi-structured Participant Interview Questions

1. <u>Introduction:</u> Overview of purpose of research, confidentiality of results, participation, timing etc. (Review the contents of the Informed Consent Letter in detail before proceeding.)

2. Where are you in the Master's program? (What courses have you completed, how many are left etc.)

3. Why did you choose to follow the Masters program on a part-time basis?

4. On what basis have you selected your courses?

5. In your view, what differentiates a good course (or a great course) from another course? Can you elaborate on that?

6. Think about a course that you have taken which you particularly enjoyed or felt was of value in your learning. What characteristics made it enjoyable or valuable to you? Why?

7. Think about a course which you have taken which you did not enjoy or you did not feel was of value to your learning. What characteristics of that course made you feel that way? Why?

8. During our discussion you have identified that (name 3-5 main characteristics identified by the participant) are important criteria against which you evaluate the courses that you have taken. Am I correct in the identification of those criteria? Are they the most important or relevant to your own evaluation of the courses you have taken? Are there others that you might add to this list?

9. Do you recall or are you familiar with the course evaluation form the University asks students to complete at the end of each course? (show participant a copy of it)

10. Looking at this form, how does it address the criteria that you have identified? Does it address the criteria that are important to you? Is it relevant/useful/applicable to those criteria? How? Why or why not?

11. Is there a way to make this evaluation process more relevant/useful/applicable to your concerns and interests? Are there criteria you would change, delete or add to this evaluation form? Why?

12. Are there any suggestions/comments you wish to make about the evaluation process?

13. What difference does the instructor make to your evaluation of the course? Thinking back to evaluations you have completed, particularly those that are very positive or very negative, how much weight was given to the assessment of the instructor, himself or herself?

14. Do you feel that the purpose of the evaluation process is to evaluate the course, the instructor or both? If both, how can this be made clearer in the form?

15. Summarize discussion, thank participant for their time and feedback. Remind them that the information will be transcribed and fed back to them in written form for them to review. Set timeline for that to be completed (information sent to them and information returned by them to you). Emphasize the confidentiality aspect of the discussion and the value of their input to the research topic.

Appendix D

Listing of Themes and Subthemes

The Form Itself

1. Clarify the purpose, intent and audience for evaluation form.
2. Restructure form to provide opportunity to comment on specific thematic areas.
3. Separate out evaluation process in three different areas/stages/times: formative (instructor-driven); summative (at end of course), and add overall M.Ed. program evaluation component.
4. Likert scale discourages evaluative comments.

Role of the Instructor

1. Diversity of teaching strategies designed to engage learners.
2. Instructor engagement in learning process.
3. Tie learning to practise.
4. Creating opportunities for transformative learning.
5. Flexibility of instructor.

Relevance

1. Form to what is being assessed.
2. Content to what is of interest to the learner.
3. Program needs vs. instructor needs vs. learner needs vs. institutional needs.
4. Do the evaluations make a difference to the assessors? (course design, instructor performance, etc.)
5. Generic questions to not cover all types of courses.
6. How to eliminate bias, skewed results.

Other Issues

1. Quality of instructors dependent upon location.
2. Availability of courses (timing and location).
3. Shaping of assignments to learner interests.
4. Course offerings to learner interests.
5. Where is feedback for independent study and internship courses?