

# **Students' Perceptions of Effective Teaching in Higher Education**

**Dr. Jerome Delaney  
Faculty of Education**

**Albert Johnson  
Distance Education and Learning Technologies**

**Dr. Trudi Johnson  
Faculty of Education**

**Dr. Dennis Treslan  
Faculty of Education**

## **Abstract**

Memorial University of Newfoundland students were asked in an online survey (Winter 2008) to provide their perceptions of effective teaching for both on-campus and distance instruction. Specifically, students were requested to identify and rank five characteristics of an effective instructor, explain why each characteristic was deemed important, and describe classroom behaviours demonstrating each characteristic. Constituting a departure from much of the existing literature, this qualitative study also provides a rich student narrative from which a student-generated definition has been formed for each of nine identified characteristics of an effective instructor. Valuable information obtained in this study is seen as a starting point for further exploration of this critical dimension of higher education teaching.

The notion of asking students to provide feedback on the quality of the teaching that they encounter during their academic career has been with us for almost a century. Student rating of instruction was introduced into North American universities in the mid-1920s (d'Apollonia & Abrami, 1997). However, the desire to clarify the qualities that make university teaching effective has been revitalized, as a renewed mandate to enhance teaching and learning appears predominately in the strategic plans of many universities and colleges. The escalation in concern over the quality of university teaching has fostered a significant body of research that attempts to isolate characteristics of effective university teaching (Young, Cantrell & Shaw, 1999).

Teaching is being seen as increasingly more important relative to the research goals of higher education. In 2006, the Canadian Council of Learning called on Canada to establish clear, coherent, and consistent goals for post-secondary education, many of which reflect on the quality of teaching and learning (Cappon, 2006). This

renewed emphasis on teaching necessitates valid means of measuring effective teaching in the post-secondary setting. There is a growing body of literature pertaining to students' assessment of instruction in higher education and the relevance of course evaluation questionnaires as a way of communicating to instructors the strengths and weaknesses of their teaching.

### **Review of the Literature**

Marsh and Roche (1993) examined students' evaluations of teaching effectiveness as a means of enhancing university teaching. Ryan and Harrison (1995) investigated how students weight various teaching components in arriving at their overall evaluation of teaching effectiveness. More recently, Ralph (2003) conducted a study on teaching effectiveness using how well students learn as the criterion. This study took place in a Canadian university and students represented four different instructional settings: Business, Sociology, Education, and Physical Education. The students were given 32 hypothetical instructor profiles and were asked to rank nine selected teaching factors developed by Marsh and Hocevar (1991). In that study Ralph identified five attributes of effective instructors: commitment to learners; knowledge of material; organization and management of the environment; desire to improve; and collaboration with others. Ralph concluded that exemplary university teaching is discernable and the quality of components that define it can be assessed.

Similar studies provided students with a set of characteristics from which to choose. Clark (1995) identified cognitive and affective goals of effective teaching at the university level. He developed a questionnaire covering a wide range of teaching activities associated with effective instruction and the achievement of cognitive and affective objectives. The questionnaire, administered at the University of Winnipeg, Manitoba, identified qualities of effective university teaching determined by the researcher. These included four cognitive components: knowledge, organization of instruction, clarity of expression, and quality of presentation. In addition, there were four affective components: student interest; student participation and openness to ideas; interpersonal relations; and communication and fairness. Many course evaluation questionnaires administered at university campuses across Canada, including Memorial University, include these qualities. Students are asked to identify how each course/instructor ranks in each of these qualities.

Devlin (2002) examined the strengths and weakness of a survey used at the University of Melbourne to identify students' perceptions of their learning environment. The Perceptions of Learning Environment Questionnaire (PLEQ) was first used in 1994 and was developed as part of a larger project, Teaching and Learning in Tertiary Education at Queensland University of Technology. Devlin argues that the PLEQ fails to sufficiently identify student perceptions in depth. The design of the PLEQ forces students to focus on and comment on the behavior of others, and, "does not allow them to communicate their views on how they

themselves are contributing to their learning” (p. 290). Devlin suggests that this approach is contrary to the PLEQ design to report on good teaching and contains none of the “. . . constructivist views of learning . . . which emphasize that learners actively construct knowledge for themselves” (p. 290). Traditional course evaluation questionnaires, she argues, assume the “student as listener-follower” point of view and a transmission model of delivering courses. While students may have been aware in the past of their own behavior and how it helped or hindered learning, the standard course evaluation questionnaires simply did not provide the means to demonstrate or express that awareness.

### **Research Questions and Method**

These studies and others like them offer to students the researchers’ understanding of the applicable characteristics in the form of Likert scale questionnaires, or controlled sets of stimuli such as the 32 teacher profiles used in Ralph’s 2003 study. The purpose of this study was to establish, through the use of an open-ended survey instrument, students’ perceptions of effective teaching at Memorial University. Drawing from their own experiences as post-secondary students, participants were asked to identify five characteristics of effective teaching, for both on-campus and distance courses, describe these characteristics, identify instructor behaviours that demonstrate the characteristics, and rate the characteristics in order of importance. The survey instrument provided allowed students to identify characteristics that they believe are important to effective teaching, rather than simply agree or disagree with a set of prescribed characteristics. This approach proved successful as respondents offered rich descriptions and detailed narratives about their experiences as students.

While much research has been conducted on the questions related to effective teaching in post-secondary institutions, projects that investigate the nature of effective teaching across modes of course delivery are rare. The growth of online distance education leads researchers to questions about the characteristics of effective teaching in online courses. Are the characteristics of effective teaching in a face-to-face environment the same as the characteristics of effective online teaching? And if so, how are these characteristics manifested through electronic media?

Traditional student questionnaires and course evaluation forms are designed with the underlying assumption that the designer and the participant agree on the characteristics of effective teaching. The method used to gather data to study students’ perceptions of effective teaching at Memorial University challenges this assumption. The first nine questions of the survey asked students for demographic information. Thirty of the remaining 40 items were open-ended and asked participants for text-based responses. The survey instrument offered students an opportunity to express their own ideas about the characteristics of effective teaching at the post-secondary level. Students were asked to draw on their own experiences as university students to identify five characteristics of effective instructors, describe

each characteristic and explain why it is important, and to identify instructor behaviours that demonstrate the characteristic. Finally, students were asked to rank the five characteristics from one to five, with one referring to the least important and five referring to the most important. The set of four questions was repeated five times for both on-campus teaching and instruction at a distance.

A goal of this study was to leave open-ended the qualities of effective teaching. Students were to be free to identify the characteristics and how they are demonstrated without having their belief system influenced by researchers' views of effective teaching. Since the origins of perceptions are found in the belief systems of the students, the rich narratives provided by the students could identify, with greater certainty, the beliefs of the participants.

The research was carried out exclusively through the use of online surveys. Studies have indicated that an online approach is an effective and efficient means of gathering data. Several recent studies have suggested that the rate of responses of Web surveys is on par with those completed on paper. For example, a study of 58, 288 college students in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in Indiana University revealed that students who completed web-based surveys responded as favorably as those who engaged in paper surveys. This response rate held for both genders, and all age groups. (Carini, Hayek, Kuh, Kennedy & Ouimett, 2003)

The survey was developed and delivered using the learning management system employed at Memorial University, Desire2Learn. Using Desire2Learn as a delivery tool provided electronic safeguards that prevented students from completing the survey more than once. The software also provided a registration system that allowed students to be entered for a chance to win one of the incentives offered for completing the survey, while assuring that each student's responses would be anonymous through the analysis stage.

The survey was made available to students from February 25, 2008 to April 4, 2008. Approximately 17,000 Memorial University students, including undergraduate and graduate students, had access to survey. The university's students are divided among four campuses (Prince Philip Drive campus, St. John's; Marine Institute, St. John's; Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, Corner Brook; Harlow Campus, London, Great Britain) and numerous work-study sites. Administering the instrument online provided the potential to reach all of the university's undergraduate and graduate students registered for the winter semester of the 2007-2008 academic year. Of that group, over 2500 opened the survey but only 330 provided usable responses. The demographics of the 330 respondents were very similar to the demographic profile of the larger university population, the two exceptions being the gender proportion, and the proportion of students who participated in the survey from the Faculty of Science. Seventy-three percent of the students who completed the survey were female, compared to sixty percent of the university population. Thirty-one percent of

the students who completed the survey study in the Faculty of Science, compared to eighteen percent of the university population. Of the 330 students who completed the survey, 161 of them provided data for both on-campus and distance delivery of courses. The demographics of the 161 respondents deviated from the demographics of the university population, but these discrepancies were consistent with the general demographics for distance students.

The on-campus data were analyzed first. The manual coding of the data identified 69 adjectives that students used to identify characteristics of effective teaching. A unique coding number was assigned to each of the adjectives. These numbers were then entered by hand onto a hard copy of the data. After completing the coding process, the data were filtered in spreadsheet software according to the unique numbers and new spreadsheets were derived, one spreadsheet for each of the 69 characteristics identified. The descriptions and instructor behaviours identified by the students for each characteristic were then harvested, and definitions and a list of instructor behaviours were compiled for each characteristic. The analysis of these definitions and behaviours led to further grouping of the data along behavioural themes. After completing the analysis, nine characteristics of effective teaching were identified. Effective university teachers at Memorial University are: respectful, knowledgeable, approachable, engaging, communicative, organized, responsive, professional, and humorous.

The same approach was used to analyze the data for the characteristics of effective teaching in distance courses. No new descriptors were identified in the responses to the part of the survey that dealt with the distance delivery of courses. Fifty-three of the adjectives identified in the on-campus segment of the survey appeared in the responses to the distance segment. No unique adjectives were present in the distance responses.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Respectful**

The on-campus students who identify the characteristic *respectful* in the survey used the following adjectives to describe both the personal and pedagogical behaviors of their instructors: fair, understanding, flexible, caring, patient, helpful, compassionate, open-minded, sincere, diplomatic, concerned, reasonable, consistent, kind, empathetic, humble, trustworthy, and realistic. *Respectful*, or the correlated descriptors associated with the characteristic, appeared in the on-campus segment of the survey 341 times, significantly more than any of the other eight characteristics. This characteristic was also the most commonly identified in the distance segment of the survey. The 161 respondents identified respectful or one of its correlates 129 times.

Those students who highlighted the personal nature of *respectful* in both on-campus and distance courses noted the nature of the valued relationship between instructor and students. They appreciate instructors who are compassionate and understanding of the unique and challenging situations that students sometimes experience when enrolled in a course. These aspects of the characteristic *respectful* are particularly important for new students.

Professors can have a bad attitude towards young or first year students, looking at them judgmentally because they are young and ignorant. This, along with the fact that most professors hate teaching first -year classes (ask any student in second year or higher and they will tell you it's true) makes them uncomfortable and feel stupid in class and could scare them from attempting a second year. When professors care that you understand what they are teaching, they will be more approachable to ask stupid questions outside of class. No one likes to feel stupid. (on-campus response)

Students from both modes of delivery single out instructors who were caring and patient. They describe a caring instructor as one who displays an interest in them, makes them feel comfortable, learns their names, and offers to help. Patient instructors are those who are willing to answer many questions and explain a concept several times if necessary. Such instructors appreciate that all students do not learn at the same pace.

An instructor's impatience is quite obvious and tends to disrupt the learning process.

Frustration on the instructor's part with a student who doesn't understand is clearly visible and it shames students into giving up on understanding. (on-campus response)

Other personal qualities that are cited under the characteristic *respectful* are kind and empathetic. Students prefer instructors who treat them with common courtesy and respect. It helps them feel comfortable enough to approach the professor to ask questions. Instructors who are empathetic relate to their students' interests and as one respondent commented, help them feel like "we're all in this together." Students appreciate professors who word their criticism in a constructive manner. They want instructors who, "think before speaking."

Without exception, the students who cited "concerned" as a characteristic of effective teaching were referring to the professors' concern for the students' academic success. They noted that students would perform better for an instructor who exhibits an emotional investment in their academic achievement.

Humility is another aspect of being respectful, according to students responding to the on-campus segment of the survey. Students expect their professors to admit

mistakes when they make them. They feel that the learning environment would be better if professors did not act as if they were superior to their students. One respondent expressed this sentiment in the following comment:

A cocky prof is horrible; they think they know it all and many are horrified when they realize that they have made a mistake. (on-campus response)

Students link humility with trust and see these as important characteristics of effective teaching. Trust has several dimensions. First, they need to trust the professional qualifications of their instructors. Secondly, they want their instructors to be honest about not knowing content. They are critical of instructors who try to bluff their way through an answer. In contrast, students are eager to accept and respect an instructor who is truthful about not knowing the answer to a question but is willing to find the answer and bring it back to class. Honesty is cited as a key component in the relationship between students and professors. Other students focused on the notion that professors are in a position of power and should be trusted not to abuse this situation.

Teachers are in a position of trust and power, and a teacher who can be trusted makes students more eager to learn and more comfortable in a classroom environment. (on-campus response)

Several other characteristics listed under this category speak to the pedagogical behaviors of instructors. This refers to aspects of the instructor's behavior that relate directly to how courses are taught. Students expect their professors to be fair and reasonable with respect to their expectations of the class. This includes: not examining material that has never been covered in class; grading all students using the same criteria; providing students with equal opportunities for success; being clear on what is expected on examinations and assignments; and giving plenty of advance notice on deadlines. Students prefer professors who find new ways to assess, other than the traditional exams and assignments. Students also feel that professors need to appreciate student workload and at times be more lenient. They should be more concerned that learning has taken place than with meeting deadlines.

Another aspect of the pedagogical nature of being *respectful* is to be helpful. This is defined as the professor who is sincere in his or her efforts to help students achieve in the course. The professor who is helpful encourages students to ask questions, is available during office hours and over email, and provides guidance on assignments and examinations.

Students also expect their instructors to be open-minded. This type of instructor is described as someone who appreciates the opinions of others and does not discriminate. Open-minded instructors encourage discussion and debate, and

respond to students equally. Consistent with this characteristic is the notion of fairness. Respondents indicate that fairness is multi-faceted. It includes a professor's expectations of students' work, fair and consistent grading of examinations and assignments, and equal treatment. One student pointed to the practice of "pegging" students at a certain mark at the beginning of the semester. Another criticized the practice of placing all the "evaluation eggs" in one basket. Another student cited the instructor who "plays up" answers from some students and "downplays" answers from others.

Students who identify realistic as a characteristic of effective teaching express a number of points of view. For some, realistic is applied to expectations. These students want realistic or reasonable expectations clearly identified by the instructor. Others want their professors to put a realistic focus on course material. They would like to see course material related to real world examples, when possible.

Survey respondents emphasize flexibility as a characteristic of two areas of effective teaching: in the instructor's knowledge of how to teach and what to teach (see definition of Knowledgeable); and in the administration of a course.

Several students highlight the variety of demands that can be placed on a student's schedule and the willingness of professors to accommodate those demands. They are asking for flexibility and tolerance in regards to due dates for assignments and flexibility with regards to the timing and administration of tests. Some students note that flexibility in teaching strategies and in evaluation components would be favorable.

Taking a course online requires patience from the instructor in getting assignments in on time. Most people taking distance courses are doing so out of necessity and probably have a lot on their plates. Flexibility from an instructor relieves stress associated with the isolated feeling of a distance course. (distance response)

## **Knowledgeable**

Students who identify *knowledgeable* as a characteristic of effective teaching in the on-campus segment of the survey used adjectives that include: flexible, competent, eclectic, credible, current, practical, reflective, and qualified. Respondents who replied to the distance segment used the same adjectives, however, credible, qualified, and reflective were not mentioned. *Knowledgeable* and its correlated descriptors were mentioned 231 times in the responses pertaining to on-campus teaching, making this characteristic the second most noted characteristic of the nine. The students who responded to the distance segment of the survey only mentioned this characteristic 89 times, placing *knowledgeable* third on the list for distance teaching.

A significant aspect of the data collected is that respondents from both groups rarely separated content knowledge and the ability to teach well. For this reason, knowledge of content and knowledge of pedagogy are not separated in the findings. Respondents indicated clearly that they believe effective teachers have strong content knowledge, and knowledge and expertise on how to teach what they know.

Students expect effective instructors to have knowledge of the subject area in which they teach above and beyond course objectives. Students expect faculty to have the ability to communicate freely about their subject area, possess a strong background in the area; inspire confidence by serving as a student resource, elicit student interest, and have the ability to respond to students' problems. Some students equate the instructor's command of the content to the level of student trust.

Students also expressed the expectation that professors be current and active in ongoing investigations in their field of study. They indicate that researching, reflecting, and/or practicing in an instructor's chosen field is significant to faculty's ability to make teaching engaging. Adjectives respondents used to describe this aspect of *knowledgeable* included: competent, credible, current, reflective and qualified.

The other component of *knowledgeable* that students identified is pedagogical knowledge. Respondents identify an instructor's ability to vary teaching strategies as a characteristic of effective teaching and an indication of strong content knowledge. For example, of the 43 students who identified flexible as a characteristic of effective teaching, 23 of them associated the notion with flexibility in teaching. These students defined flexibility as the ability to adapt to the learning styles of students, provide different approaches to teaching the material (i.e., switch often from giving notes, to class discussion, to small group work). Others highlighted the importance of offering a variety of evaluation alternatives noting that not all students perform well in written tests and prefer other forms of assessment. Others who defined flexible in terms of teaching and learning highlighted the importance of professors to consider openly the opinions of students on the content.

Other adjectives students used to describe the ability of faculty to vary teaching methods included: practical, eclectic, qualified and reflective. When students use the word practical as a descriptor of *knowledgeable*, they are indicating that students want their course material to be related to real life as much as possible. They would appreciate assignments that show the application of theory to practice in their future careers. This is particularly true in the professional schools, but a number of students suggested an even broader application.

A small proportion of on-campus responses mentioned knowledge of technology, but students who replied to the distance segment of the survey often noted that faculty should possess a good knowledge of information and communications technologies.

## Approachable

Students who identified *approachable* as a characteristic of effective teaching described these behaviors using adjectives that include: friendly, personable, helpful, accessible, happy and positive. Students who completed the distance segment of the survey cited all of these adjectives excluding happy and positive. *Approachable* and its correlated descriptors were highlighted, by on-campus students, 210 times, making it the third most noted characteristic of the nine. Respondents to the distance portion mentioned the characteristic 69 times, placing it fourth for distance delivery. The expectations cited by both groups, however, are similar. The methods of communication students described vary for on-campus and distance course delivery, but appropriately so given the modes of instruction.

The definitions that students provided encompass three main themes: the positive interaction between professor and students; the comfort level of students to ask questions and to seek advice; and the sincere effort on the part of instructors to help students reach their academic goals.

The descriptor “positive”, commonly used in the on-campus part of the survey, includes a broad range of behaviors. First, students want their professors to be positive about teaching them. One student felt that:

It is all too easy to tell that some professors would rather have their teeth pulled than teach a class. A positive attitude impacts how hard the students work and can be enhanced in small ways like smiling.  
(on-campus response)

Secondly, students look for faculty who are friendly, helpful and patient. They appreciate it when instructors learn their names and show an interest in their progress. They would like for them to chat outside of class and greet students in class. Thirdly, some respondents indicate that there is a connection between being positive and students’ academic success. They are critical of those professors who tell their students that the course is difficult and that many of them will not pass. They feel that faculty should encourage students, provide guidance on course work and use a variety of teaching strategies to accommodate students’ needs.

The behavior of *approachable* also includes creating an atmosphere where students are comfortable asking questions and seeking help, both during class and outside of class. To that end, students want their instructors to be available and accessible, to maintain appropriate office hours and respond to emails in a reasonable time period.

A third theme in this behavior relates to the instructors’ concern for students’ academic achievement. Several respondents to both the on-campus and distance portions of the survey single out their wish to have instructors who are sincere in helping them achieve in their courses. These instructors do not ridicule their

students if they do not understand the course material. One student suggests that faculty should “let their students know they can come to them with any questions they might have, no matter how trivial they may seem.” Another student feels that an effective instructor is one who is able to “answer any questions and not make you feel stupid about not knowing something.” They suggest there is a correlation between the instructor’s interest in being there and the students’ success in the course.

Being friendly, according to a number of on-campus students, will result in better class attendance and a greater responsiveness to course material. Being friendly is also perceived by some students as being a prerequisite for good interpersonal communication, an important part of their education. Respondents to the distance segment of the survey noted this aspect of the characteristic as well.

Many respondents emphasize *approachable* as a behavior of effective teaching because of their concern for the effects of intimidation, especially on first-year students. According to the students who identify *approachable* as a behavior of effective teaching, professors who are *approachable* add life to their courses. They are enthusiastic and upbeat in their teaching. They develop a rapport with their students and build a positive learning atmosphere where everyone has an opportunity to succeed. One student observes:

[having an approachable instructor] fosters an academic environment where communication and respect promote the essence of knowledge sharing. (on-campus response)

The conclusion is that “professors who are not *approachable* are unaware of how students are really progressing in the course until it’s too late. Students end up failing assignments and then the professor wonders why they fail.” Clearly, it is important to students that professors are genuinely interested in teaching them and the subject regardless of the mode of delivery.

## Engaging

On-campus students who identify instructor behaviors that were *engaging* describe these behaviors using adjectives that include: enthusiastic, interesting, passionate, motivating, creative, positive, charismatic, stimulating, interactive, energetic, and assertive. Distance students again followed suit. They did not include in their responses, however, assertive, challenging, charismatic, energetic, positive, or stimulating. Respondents to the on-campus portion of the survey highlight *engaging* and its correlated descriptors 198 times, making it the fourth most noted characteristic of the nine. Respondents to the distance section of the survey highlighted the characteristic 44 times, making it the seventh most noted of the nine. The definitions respondents from both segments of the survey provided for characteristics that fell under *engaging* predominately dealt with three attributes: the

passion and enthusiasm demonstrated by the instructor for the course material and teaching; their ability to share this passion and enthusiasm with their students; and the level to which this energy influences their pedagogical choices.

Demonstrating passion for the course was highlighted as a positive behavior, one that respondents believed would draw students closer to the topic being studied, help students enjoy learning, inspire students, and make the course interesting through fostering a positive atmosphere. Students also indicate that an obvious desire to investigate, research, and/or practice in their chosen field is a good indicator of an instructor's level of interest in their subject area.

Another characteristic identified by respondents is that faculty should have a desire, and openly enjoy, teaching and working with their students. They believe that a good attitude toward students and students' efforts help to create a positive learning environment and is a strong motivational factor. Respondents identified a number of behaviors that would be an indicator of this characteristic including: smiling, interacting with students, getting to know students, lecturing in a positive manner, being well prepared for class, utilizing effective public speaking practices, varying tone of voice, varying teaching strategies, and being accessible to students.

The results indicate that students believe that passing on an instructor's passion for their discipline has a cause and effect relationship with the pedagogical choices that teachers make. Students note that they are engaged and motivated by professors who encourage them to become involved actively in the lecture. Interactive teachers are described as stimulating, energetic, and charismatic.

Sheepish instructors are not listened to well. There are certain instructors that though they may be fully competent in their field, completely fail to spark any kind of interest in the topic. A professor that isn't confident in teaching their material is often just as bad as having no professor at all. (on-campus response)

Students want faculty to be creative with their approach to teaching and value instructors who employ a variety of teaching strategies and interactive activities. Creative approaches keep students interested in topics. They make dry, abstract content come alive.

Creative projects/discussion keep students interested and active and help us gain knowledge. (distance response)

They also highlighted the desire for their instructors to demonstrate confidence in their knowledge of their content area by being able to respond to questions, and by being able to challenge students. Respondents rarely separate pedagogical and content knowledge when they describe good teaching. The conclusion drawn from

this is that strong content knowledge does not guarantee good teaching, but good teaching is dependent on strong content knowledge.

### **Communicative**

Respondents to the on-campus and distance portions of the survey highlighted several personal attributes under *communicative*. They used specific adjectives to describe this characteristic, including clear, understandable, thorough, constructive, and attentive. Respondents who completed the on-campus segment of the survey mentioned *communicative* or its correlated descriptors 153 times, making the characteristic the fifth most noted of the nine. Students who responded to the distance portion of the survey mentioned the characteristic 69 times, tying it with *approachable* for the fourth most noted characteristic of effective teaching at a distance.

The majority of on-campus students noted the importance of language, particularly effective command of English. For some on-campus and distance students, *communicative* means using a variety of teaching methods to help students understand course content. Some students feel that being organized is part of being *communicative*. Other on-campus students highlighted the importance of astute listening skills. They indicated that they want their instructors to be approachable and able to talk to them in a meaningful way about course content. Students who responded to the distance segment of the survey noted many of the same concerns as their on-campus counterparts, but focused their discussion on communication through electronic modes.

Survey respondents from both the on-campus and distance segments of the survey who chose the word clear as a descriptor gave it two dimensions. First, they note that instructors should be clear in the presentation of material. They indicate that professors should ensure their notes are well organized and the visuals and demonstrations are used to clarify difficult content. Secondly, students feel that instructors should make clear their expectations for evaluation. They want their instructors to be specific about requirements for tests and assignments, and that course outlines be clear and concise.

Consistent with the descriptor, “clear”, students also chose understandable as a part of being *communicative*. Students want instructors to deliver coherent lectures, or well organized and clear web content, give practical work to support learning, speak clearly and loudly or write clearly in discussion forum postings and email, and explain what is expected in their course.

Students also want their instructors to be thorough. For on-campus students this descriptor refers specifically to maximizing use of instructional time, avoiding irrelevant material, providing lists of supplementary course materials, and giving

tutorials. Students who take courses online want their instructors to accommodate the fact that many of them have not taken courses in many years.

Prompt, quality feedback is a theme that appears often in student responses both for the on-campus and distance segments of the survey. The distance students, however, were very concerned about the speed with which instructor feedback was forwarded to them. Prompt feedback appeared to be a very important characteristic of effective teaching at a distance. Students who note constructive as a characteristic of effective teaching focused on the importance of constructive criticism from professors. They indicate that constructive feedback could encourage student learning and provide experiences that could bolster self-confidence. To that end, they prefer that their instructors avoid sarcasm and degrading remarks. Students see constructive criticism as a link to more effective evaluation.

Another descriptor of the characteristic communicative is attentive. On-campus students who identified attentive as an aspect of effective teaching focused on listening skills and their instructor's attention to detail. They want their instructors to be vigilant when students are writing examinations, pay due diligence while students are doing presentations, return tests and assignments in a reasonable period of time, and listen carefully to students as they ask questions.

Students who responded to the distance segment of the survey highlighted the approach that instructors use when communicating with students in discussion forums or email. They want their instructors to pay attention to what the students write and respond appropriately.

## **Organized**

Respondents to both the on-campus and distance segments of the survey identified *organized* as a characteristic of effective teaching. Other adjectives that students used to describe this set of behaviours included efficient, focused, and prepared. Students who responded to the online segment of the survey highlighted *organized* or its correlated descriptors 133 times, making the characteristic the sixth most mentioned of the nine. Distance students noted the characteristic 68 times, making it the fifth most mentioned in the distance portion of the survey, just one behind approachable and communicative, both mentioned 69 times. Both on-campus and distance students value this aspect of effective teaching, as they feel that it has a reciprocating effect. One on-campus student notes:

If the prof is organized in teaching the course, I will be organized in doing the course. (on-campus response)

Students prefer instructors who are *organized* in their lectures and online content, in their approach to the subject matter, and in their dealings with students. An *organized* instructor's actions include having lectures prepared; using clear visual

aids; being coherent in class or with notes on a web site; reviewing a test when it is handed back to students; providing a course outline; and providing feedback consistently throughout the course.

The first behavior identified by students in this category is being prepared. On-campus students believe that to be prepared means to maximize instructional time and to know course content. Instructors should tell students what they will be learning and what is expected of them. Students who responded to the distance survey identified similar behaviours, but framed their comments in the context of the online delivery of courses.

Students also identified focused as a characteristic of *organized* teaching. On-campus students noted that instructors should stay on topic. Students comment that it is difficult to understand or pay attention when a professor is not focused on topic. Distance students made similar comments, but in the context of online delivery.

The third characteristic used to describe *organized* is efficient. Students in both on-campus and distance segments of the study identify two important aspects of this behavior: providing sufficient feedback to them and making the most of instructional time, be it in the classroom or online. Students from both groups prefer to receive feedback on examinations and assignments in a reasonable period of time. For distance students, efficient also referred to responding to email and discussion postings promptly.

## **Responsive**

Students who completed the on-campus portion of the survey want professors to be *responsive*. They used adjectives that include available, helpful, efficient, perceptive and accommodating to describe the behaviour. Respondents indicated that *responsive*, as a behavior, encompasses two attributes, the instructors' responses to students' oral and written work, and the instructors' awareness of individual student needs. On-campus students identified *responsive* or one of its correlated descriptors 91 times, making *responsive* the seventh most mentioned characteristic of on-campus teaching. Respondents to the distance portion of the survey identified the same behaviours as did the respondents to the on-campus segment except for perceptive. There was, however, a significant difference in the emphasis distance students placed on *responsive* behaviours. Distance students identified *responsive* or one of its correlates 100 times, making the characteristic the second most mentioned of the nine.

The first attribute of being *responsive* is to provide students with timely, thorough and constructive feedback in their course work. While on-campus students appreciate the busy workload of faculty, they feel that the longer it takes to receive comments on their work, the more difficult it is to address the changes suggested by the instructor or to understand the grades. To discuss their progress with

professors, respondents suggest that faculty set and maintain reasonable office hours and respond to all emails as soon as possible.

Two important components of feedback for on-campus students are discussion and questioning during class time. Students would like their instructors to involve them more in the learning process. This would result in a more effective and efficient use of instructional time. Students who responded to the distance segment of the survey shared similar concerns with on-campus students but framed their responses in the context of distance technologies used to deliver online courses.

The second attribute of being *responsive* is the instructors' awareness of individual student's needs. Both on-campus and distance students believe that effective teaching involves being perceptive; specifically, being attentive to signs from students that indicate the course material is too difficult or a particular concept is not well understood. Students' questions and body language, in the case of on-campus teaching, should help the instructor with that insight. Students who completed the distance portion of the survey want their professors to be attentive to these signs as they appear in online communications, responding quickly and carefully to email and discussion forum postings, and asking for clarification on the part of the student should the need exist.

Furthermore, instructors should accept the fact that everyone does not learn and express ideas at the same pace. For that reason, they suggest that professors should be more accommodating with deadlines and flexible in the time frame for examinations. Students concluded that being *responsive* in a timely and efficient manner as well as being sensitive to their individual differences and accommodating their needs will result in a greater sense of trust between teacher and student. The respondents believe that an instructor who "cares about being an effective teacher, not just his or her area of expertise, will help them reach their highest potential as students."

Students who completed the distance segment of the survey were greatly concerned about the responsiveness of faculty teaching online. Their concern is quite valid given that for the vast majority of distance students, all communication with instructors is mediated electronically, through email, discussion forums, or audio or video conferencing (i.e., web-based audio and video conferencing, or telephone). For distance students, timely and constructive feedback to questions or evaluation components is extremely important.

### **Professional**

Respondents to the on-campus segment of the survey who identify *professional* as a characteristic of effective teaching use adjectives that include dedicated, punctual, dependable, efficacious, hygienic, and confident. The responses from the distance portion of the survey were similar. Distance students omitted efficacious, and

hygienic. On-campus students mentioned *professional* or its correlated descriptors 85 times, and distance students 27 times, making the characteristic the eighth most mentioned of the nine for both sets of data.

The descriptions provided by on-campus students focus on appropriate dress, punctuality, trust, honesty, and a measured presence in terms of the instructors' interaction with students. Students note that they want their professors, not teaching assistants, to teach the course.

Having TA's teach the course shows the professor and university is not valuing the students. (on-campus response)

They expect their instructors to be appropriately dressed and hygienic.

Smelly, dirty profs turn me off from going to a class. (on-campus response)

It is hard to take someone seriously when they are dressed like a mess or like a slob. (on-campus response)

Both distance and on-campus students expect faculty to maintain a *professional* demeanor when dealing with students' questions, both in person and electronically. Several respondents note the importance of prompt responses to emails and other electronic communications. They expect instructors to be in class on time with well-planned lectures and activities. Needlessly cancelling classes is described as unacceptable. They want their professors to stay on the course material, but appreciate the interjection of personal anecdotes that highlighted concepts being studied in the course material. They want to be able to trust their instructors to be faithful to the course syllabus and to establish *professional* expectations for student conduct in their classes and laboratory activities. They note that, when a professor exhibits a *professional* presence and is dedicated to teaching, they feel valued as students. For some, being dedicated means keeping up with technology and new teaching methods.

Furthermore, students expect their professors to display a sense of confidence and to pass that confidence on to their students. Without confidence students are left to doubt their own knowledge because they doubt the material being taught. Distance students also noted that instructors should be confident in their technical skills.

## **Humorous**

Students appreciate a sense of humor as a characteristic of effective teaching. It encompasses many facets of the instructor's personality, including having a positive outlook on teaching, being kind and approachable, and building a more *engaging* pedagogical experience through classroom atmosphere and student-teacher

rapport. Two adjectives that are consistently used to describe a *humorous* instructor are “happy” and “positive”. On-campus students mentioned humor or its correlated descriptors 51 times, and distance students 11 times, making the characteristic the ninth most mentioned of the nine for both sets of data.

Students who completed the on-campus segment of the survey contend that instructors with a sense of humor help them feel more relaxed. Responses provided by distance students concurred with the findings presented in the on-campus portion of the survey, but their comments were framed in the context of distance delivery.

Students also recommend that instructors inject stories, personal experiences, and some humor into their lectures. They expect their professors to be positive about teaching the material and about being in class. In the opinion of the respondents, such qualities make a professor more approachable. They believe that friendlier instructors are more likely to be available to listen to students’ concerns and questions. For on campus students, this characteristic is demonstrated by coming into class with a smile, greeting students, and having a ‘chat’ with them before class begins. Distance students would rely more on the content, language, and tone of electronic communications.

## Conclusion

There is great potential for this study to inform research in related areas. These results may be useful to researchers investigating the gap, if any, between students’ and faculty perceptions of effective teaching; the change over time of students’ perceptions of effective teaching; a comparison of Memorial University to other Canadian universities in regard to students’ perceptions of effective teaching; and the influence (if any) of the amount of university experience on students’ beliefs regarding effective instruction. Hopefully, this study will be the beginning of a more extensive research agenda in the area of effective teaching at the post-secondary level.

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