

Perceived Student Learning in an Online Environment

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**Online Sport Management Education: What Students' Qualitative
Comments Tell Us About Their Perceptions of Learning**

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Abstract

What do students perceive they are learning in the online setting? Using students open-ended comments on the Student Assessment of Instruction (SAI) instrument, researchers employed a case study approach to explore students' perceptions of instruction in the online and face-to-face settings in an undergraduate sport management course at a regional comprehensive university in the North Carolina state system. Qualitative results indicated that online students highlighted that the types of assignments were interesting and the structure of the course was helpful toward understanding expectations. Face-to-face students highlighted learning, having enjoyed learning, and the knowledge and enthusiasm of the professor. Thematic results revealed that online students distinguished the administrative aspects of instruction; whereas, students in the face-to-face setting expressed themes centered on the conceptual or theoretical aspects of instruction. The themes identified in this case study offer guidance to educators who are interested in refining their online courses so as to stimulate students conceptual and theoretical learning.

Keywords: online education; course evaluations; students' perceptions of learning; learning environment

Introduction

With higher education transitioning into the 21st century, it comes as no surprise that the acceptance of online education is trending upward. Online education has increased at a rate of 3.9 percent, up two-tenths of 1 percent from 2014 (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 55.4% of undergraduate students are either enrolled exclusively or are taking at least one online course during an academic year.

According to the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM), sport management is one of the fastest growing academic majors on a college campus, with over 500 sport management programs across the United States, an increase of over 25 percent from 2008 (NASSM, 2017). As an academic discipline, sport management has experienced exponential growth in a short period of time when compared to other majors, making it ripe for research and its findings applicable to other fields within the academy (Ferris & Perrew, 2014; Willett, Brown, & Goldfine, 2017).

While research pertaining to online education has flourished, it has failed to fully address the field of sport management. A primary concern regarding online education includes the student's comprehension of course materials. Kolowich (2012) found that utilizing a variety of assignments in the online learning environment may assist in achieving the pedagogical goals that are sought after in the face-to-face setting. Sport management curriculum is unique in that professionals need theoretical *and* practical skills to flourish, especially as it relates to leadership and ethics (DeSensi, Kelley, Blanton, & Beitel, 1990). Very few studies in the sport management literature have addressed students' perceptions of online instruction and have instead focused on outcomes and best practices (Butts, 2009; Chen & Ryder, 2006; Keiper & Kreider, 2014). Similar studies, however, have been conducted in the management field utilizing surveys to assess instructor performance (Fitó-Bertran, Hernández-Lara, & Serradell-López, 2014; Hernández, Gorjup, & Cascón, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of instruction in the online and face-to-face learning environments in a sport management course to gain a better understanding as to what students perceive they are learning in the online setting. Determining this may assist faculty in better shaping their online course(s) in ways that convey to students the importance of the conceptual and theoretical aspects of learning.

Student Perceptions of Online Education

Students desire responsive and engaging faculty in online classes, noting that when coupled with enriching content their enjoyment was at its highest (Herbert, 2006). Eom, Wen, and Ashill (2006) provided support for Herbert's finding that students enjoy an engaging instructor in an online course. They found that course structure, learning style, self-motivation, and instructor knowledge were significantly correlated with user satisfaction and that instructor feedback, learning style, and user satisfaction were significantly correlated with learning outcomes. Faculty-to-student as well as student-to-student interaction in the online format were found to be significant predictors of overall student satisfaction (Eom et al. 2006). Interaction was a critical indicator of student success and enjoyment in an online course.

Young (2006) found that interaction with students is critical and that students desire engaging content. It appears that students' perceptions are grounded in their experience with the course content because the online environment is often asynchronous, placing the emphasis on the student to drive their educational experience. Young's (2006) findings revealed that in the online setting students want their instructor to show care for her/his students and

communicate effectively. Engaging course content using meaningful examples was found to be an effective method in keeping students engaged in the course (Young, 2006). Due to the nature of an online course it is, perhaps more difficult for an instructor to bring humor or discussion into her/his lectures and content; however, instructors should seek to find ways to do these things since engaging course material appears to be a foundational aspect of a well-received online course (Butler & Pinto-Zipp, 2005).

Students taking online courses appear to desire an engaging environment where they interact with content, classmates, and the instructor. Attle and Baker (2007) pointed out that sport management students can be competitive, especially in the classroom, and recommended that an enhanced understanding of how to educate this subset of a university's student population is important. Today's technology allows young adults to engage with the world through social media outlets making it almost mandatory for college professors to be engaging themselves. The use of social media in an online course is unique in that it enables students to engage in discussions about real world issues related to course content outside of the online classroom setting (Lebel et al., 2015). Social media provides a unique tool for faculty to engage their students both within and outside the classroom. A faculty member can create a hashtag for their course, encouraging students to tweet using the hashtag for the course to create a digital archive of stories that interested the students, bringing them for discussion in during class meetings.

Attempts should be made to develop social settings in online courses and opportunities should be given to students to engage with each other through assignments or discussion boards throughout the semester (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Finch, 2006). Edwards and Finger (2007) discussed the possibility of implementing hyper-pedagogy techniques (i.e., virtual reality and the use of gaming) into a sport management classroom. Students engage with technology and expect faculty to engage with technology through course management websites, email, and other forms of digital communications (Lebel, Danylchuk, & Millar, 2015; Proserpio & Gioia, 2007).

Faculty Perceptions of Online Education

Faculty perceptions of online education appear to be conflicted. On the one hand, faculty enjoy the flexibility that teaching an online course affords, while on the other, they wonder whether students are learning the course content. Faculty expressed the concern as to whether face-to-face pedagogical goals can be achieved through online education (Kolowich, 2012).

Faculty who have a personal interest in technology and enjoy the intellectual challenge of teaching online also expressed positive sentiment toward online education (Cook, Ley, Crawford, & Warner, 2009). Since students are attuned to technology even in the classroom setting, faculty must adapt their pedagogical methods to tap into the learning desires of the student. O'Boyle (2014) discussed the opportunity for faculty to use social media in the classroom to engage students through a familiar communication medium. Lebel et al. (2015) suggested using social media and other digital pedagogies to connect with students in the face-to-face setting but expressed concern that utilizing said techniques in an online course may be difficult due to the absence of eye-to-eye contact.

While online education poses difficulties in terms of authentic interaction, faculty have discussed means to mediate the social barriers faced between faculty and students (Wingo, Ivankova, & Moss, 2017). The use of discussion boards in online courses is a common method for engaging students socially with the instructor and other students, but scholars have discussed other means of providing social interaction in an online environment. Arbaugh and Benbunan-Finch (2006) found that the use of web-based meeting software could enable connections between students and be used as a way of improving student comprehension of material. Social connection is foundational in the traditional classroom and efforts should be made to establish the same interactions in the online setting (Putnam, 2000).

Method Procedure

A qualitative analysis was conducted to explore students' perceptions of instruction in the online and face-to-face settings using students' responses to the open-ended statement section of the Student Assessment of Instruction (SAI) instrument. The SAI is commonly utilized at universities and colleges and is a valid and reliable instrument to assess student perceptions of learning and faculty instruction. Administrators and faculty committees actively use the SAI to inform faculty reappointment, tenure, and promotion decisions (Marsh, 1984, 1987; Overall & Marsh, 1980).

The SAI includes two open-ended statements: 1) describe the best aspects of this course; and, 2) describe changes that could be made to improve the course. Researchers, independent of each other, collected, sorted, coded, and categorized the written comments. Then, the researchers shared their analyses to identify differences. Categorized comments were verified and data were presented in bar chart form. The final step involved conducting thematic analyses of the students'

open-ended comments; extracting related concepts and determine the dominate themes in the two learning environments.

Britto et al. (2014) attempted to establish benchmarks for the online educational experience from three universities, we employ a similar technique but, in an attempt, to understand the SAI from two instructors teaching the same course and using the same materials and guidelines. We did not seek to understand individual teaching differences; rather, our aim was to better understand how students perceive instruction as communicated through their completion of the open-ended section of the SAI in the two learning environments. One instructor taught two face-to-face sections of the course while another instructor taught an online section of the course. The same course textbook was used by both instructors and the course content was similar. The online instructor utilized the face-to-face instructors' course and Blackboard materials.

The decision to only use the qualitative comments from the SAI was to maintain consistency between the face-to-face and online course sections. The questions utilized by the institution on the SAI for the quantitative assessment were different for the online and face-to-face courses. The qualitative questions were the same, providing validity to the study in examining the two sections. In an idealistic setting, we would have used the quantitative questions can compared them using a t-test but the content validity of the assessment drastically varied between the two courses. The decision to use the qualitative question was done to provide an area of examination, leading to possible areas of future exploration explained in the limitations section of this paper.

Participants

Participant numbers varied depending on each student's decision to respond to the open-ended statements section of the SAI. The online response rate for the best aspects of the course was 63% (17 out of 27); the face-to-face response rate was 68% (42 out of 62). The online response rate for changes that could be made to improve the course was 18.5% (5 out of 27); the face-to-face response rate was 48% (30 out of 62).

Students were enrolled in one of three sections of an undergraduate Sport Ethics course at a regional comprehensive university in North Carolina (approximate enrollment of 10,000). One section of this course was offered online in the fall of 2015 and two sections of this course were offered face-to-face in spring of 2015. The sport management course offering is a required course for sport management majors and is also satisfies a general education requirement in the "Humanities" category. Murphy and Stewart (2015) adopted a similar

methodology for use of participants but in a science-based course in the exploration of online vs. face-to-face education in undergraduate students.

Data Analysis

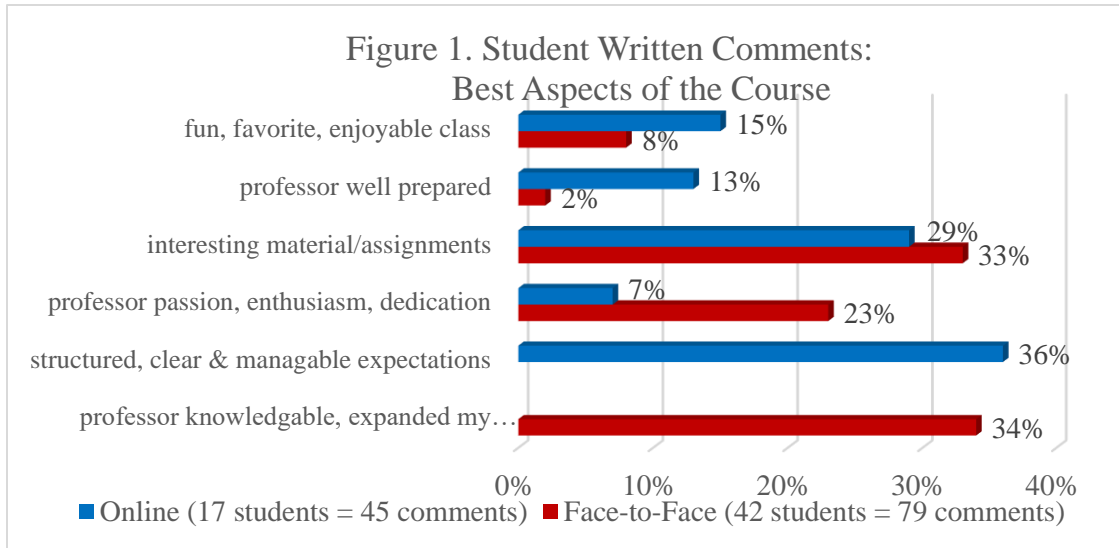
A qualitative analysis was conducted on students' written comments to the open-ended statements to examine students' perceptions of instruction in the two environments and to determine whether a particular perceived learning trend was present among the class as a whole in the different learning settings. Qualitative research is an attempt to analyze a phenomenon through the use of words and natural language processing, instead of measurement through quantitative scales. Student comments pertaining to the two open-ended statements were sorted, coded, and categorized..

Next, thematic analyses were conducted using Leximancer. Leximancer is a qualitative analysis software tool that conducts conceptual and relational analyses of written words and visual text providing a means of "quantifying and displaying" the conceptual structure (Bals, Campbell, & Pitt, 2012; Smith, McFadden, & McFadden, 2016, p. 3). The Leximancer mapping subsystem works in two stages: 1) conceptual extraction or the determination of dominant themes; and, 2) relational extraction which involves mapping relationships of themes against each other (A. E. Smith & Humphreys, 2006). The analysis is built around concepts and themes, quantitatively associated by Leximancer's algorithm, producing the output of connectivity. Connectivity describes the connections between concepts that are strong and weak, described as "highways and backroads" (Smith et al., 2016, p. 17). Seed words "represent the starting point for the definition of such concepts, with each concept definition containing one or more seeds" which are learned automatically from the text (Smith et al., 2016, p. 9). This software served as an important instrument by which to gain insight into the themes that were present in students' written comments on the open-ended section of the SAI.

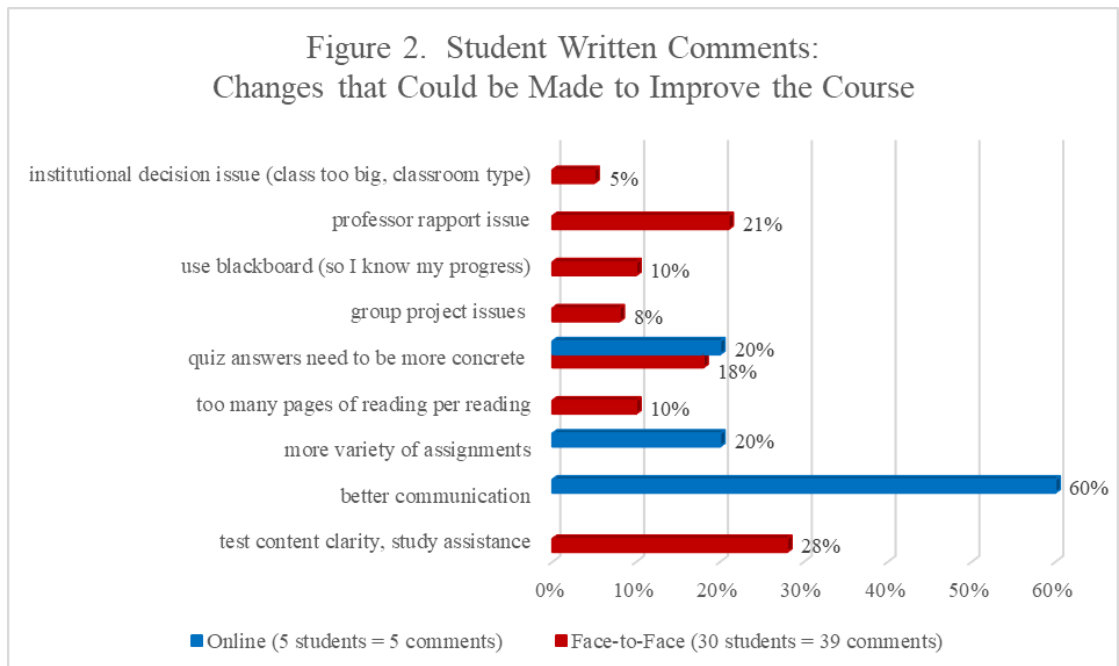
Results

The qualitative analysis of students' written comments to the first open-ended statement, describe the best aspects of the course, revealed differences pertaining to the face-to-face and online learning environments (see Figure 1). Student response rates varied since the written comments section of the SAI is open-ended and optional. The online response rate for the best aspects of the course was 63% (17 out of 27); the face-to-face response rate was 68% (42 out of 62). Response rates differ from the *n* values given in Figures 1 and 2 since

reported SAI responses are per student, not per student response. This being the case, some student responses included different types of comments which required that they be placed into different thematic categories.



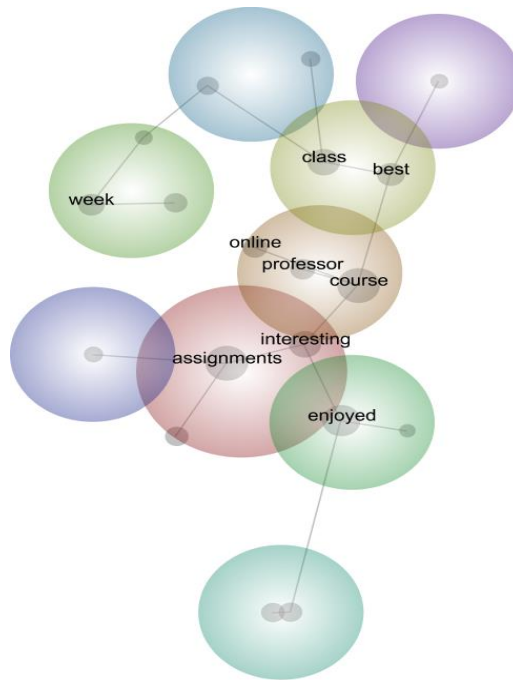
Results pertaining to statement 2, describe the changes that could be made to improve the course, are given in Figure 2. The online response rate for changes that could be made to improve the course was 18.5% (5 out of 27); the face-to-face response rate was 48% (30 out of 62).



Perceived Student Learning in an Online Environment

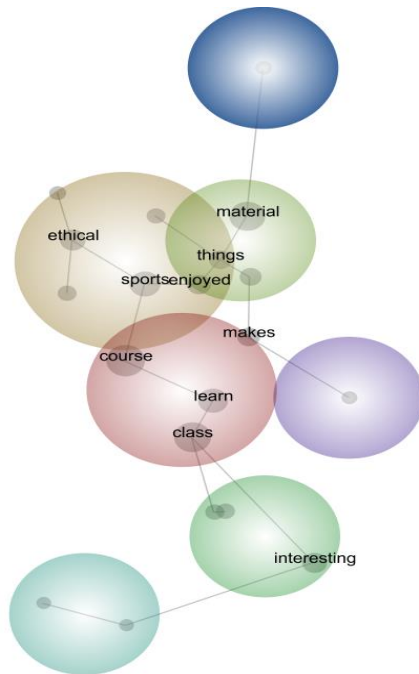
Lastly, thematic analyses revealed the dominant themes and the relationships of the themes one-to-another in each of the learning environments (see Figures 3 & 4).

Figure 3. Results of Thematic Analysis for Online Course



The dominate theme in the online course setting was “interesting assignments” (100% connectivity and relevance) which was relationally linked to “course” and “online professor” (91%). “Course” was linked, to a lesser degree (59%), to “best class” as well as “enjoyed” (50%) by way of “interesting”.

Figure 4. Results of Thematic Analysis for Face-to-Face Course



The dominate theme in the face-to-face setting was “you learn in the class” (100% connectivity and relevance) which was relationally linked to “enjoyed learning about issues in sports” (79%). The above was linked to “material related to sports” (56%) which was linked to “professor was knowledgeable” (7%) and “enthusiastic” (6%) and presented the material in an “interesting” way (33%).

Discussion

The highest percentage of students’ written comments regarding the best aspects of the online course were that the course was “structured, clear, and that the expectations were manageable” (36%); whereas, there were no student comments in this regard in the face-to-face section, supporting Young’s (2006) finding. Additionally, 13% of student comments in the online course noted the “professor was well prepared” versus just 2% in the face-to-face section.

On the flip side, the highest percentage of students’ written comments regarding the best aspects of the face-to-face course were that the “professor is

knowledgeable, and he/she expanded my mind/learning” (34%) (versus zero student comments in the online section) reiterating Kolowich’s (2012) concern as to whether face-to-face pedagogical goals are achieved in the online setting. Additionally, 23% of the students in the face-to-face course wrote that the “professor was passionate, enthusiastic, and dedicated” (versus 7% of student comments in the online course).

Turning to students’ open-ended comments regarding changes that could be made to improve the course. Of the five comments in the online section, three centered on the issue of “better communication”. There were no student comments in the face-to-face course pertaining to “better communication”. It may be the case that because students in an online environment have the freedom to submit a question or comment to their professor at any time of day or night they have a higher expectation of an immediate faculty response.

Changes that could be made in the face-to-face setting ranged from issues that are exclusive to the face-to-face environment (i.e., class size, classroom type), to “work load” (i.e., too many pages of reading/reading, study assistance, and clarity of test content), to “professor rapport”. These areas comprised 64% of students’ comments in the face-to-face setting, while there were no comments made in these areas in the online setting. These findings may be linked to the concreteness and clarity of instructions that can be brought to bear in an online setting since the instructor must write out every directive. In the face-to-face setting, many of these things may be discussed in class and should a student not be in attendance they are likely to miss any number of instructions and/or explanations of materials.

Lastly, the thematic analyses afforded researchers the opportunity to examine students’ written comments to determine dominant themes and the relationships of the themes one-to-another. The dominate theme in the online course setting was interpreted as “interesting assignments” (100% connectivity and relevance) which was relationally linked to the “course” and “online professor” (91%). “Course” was linked, to a lesser degree (59%), to “best class” as well as “enjoyed” (50%) by way of “interesting”. In sum, thematic results for the online setting suggested that students: 1) found the assignments to be interesting; 2) liked the online setting and the professor; 3) found the weekly structure to be helpful toward understanding what is expected of them; and, 4) enjoyed being in the class.

The dominate theme in the face-to-face setting was interpreted as “you learn in the class” (100% connectivity and relevance) which was relationally linked to “enjoyed learning about issues in sports” (79%). The above was linked to “material related to sports” (56%) which was linked to “professor was knowledgeable” (7%) and “enthusiastic” (6%) and presented the material in an

“interesting” (33%) way. In sum, thematic results for the face-to-face setting suggested that students: 1) learned about issues in sport; 2) enjoyed learning about issues in sport; 3) felt that the material related to sports and was presented in an interesting way; and, 4) found the professor to be knowledgeable and enthusiastic.

Outcomes for Undergraduate Students

Undergraduate students of today appear to be transactional learners, a growing concern that they are a part of the changing educational system that places an emphasis on learning content to master a standardized test (Heddy, Sinatra, Seli, Taasobshirazi, & Mukhopadhyay, 2017). Discussions amongst colleagues have reinforced the notion that students lack the social skills or desire to engage in social settings that do not involve their phones or other electronics. Students appear to not seek a career in sales because of a fear of denial and social anxiety, which is leading to troubling signs for the future of the sport industry (Bush, Bush, Oakley, & Cicala, 2014). Online courses typically provide an environment grounded in transactional education, leading to a comfort zone for students.

As previously noted, it is imperative for faculty to design their online courses with social components to force their students to engage with their peers and society through course content. We believe that online courses lead to the development of entry and mid-level management because of the transactional nature of the roles. After completing this study, we feel face-to-face courses have the ability to produce mid to high-level managers because of the ability to introduce transformational elements into the course, replicating social interactions that are necessary for success in the industry as a professional. The decision to place a course online should not be done lightly, because not every course works well in an online format. A finance course may work well in an online environment, but an event management course should be taught in a face-to-face course to integrate social components leading to success in the industry. The increasing presence of experiential learning in higher education should also be considered when designing and teaching an online course.

Limitations and Future Research

This case study is the ‘tip of the iceberg’ as it pertains to examining students’ perceptions of learning in an online sport management course. While a future study comparing the same course and the same instructor would be encouraged, it should be noted that the instructor who taught the face-to-face sections in this study recently received SAI student evaluation data pertaining to

his/her online graduate course. One might hypothesize that “same instructor”, regardless of learning environment, would be of important; however, this was not the case. In fact, the open-ended comments from the students in the online graduate course (this, taught by the instructor who taught the face-to-face undergraduate course) more closely mirrored the open-ended comments of the students in online undergraduate course taught by the other instructor. It would be advantageous for a future research to explore different students’ perceptions other institutions. Future researchers need to ensure they maintain validity in their study with different faculty and the online vs. face-to-face courses. The SAI typically varies from face-to-face to online courses, steps need to be done to ensure validity of the study.

We acknowledge one of the limitations of the study was a lack an exploration of only the qualitative questions from the SAI, neglecting the quantitative questions. In order to maintain a standard of validity, we decided to pursue the qualitative questions as a starting point for the study, leading to potential future studies if quantitative SAI questions match. The SAI is not a standardized assessment across all institutions, created by the Faculty Senate at an institution and ratified for use by the Faculty to be used in the assessment of their instruction. While it may have been a perceived limitation of this study, we believe the results of this study make an impact on the literature and can foster future work examining the perceived perception of online sport management education.

Consider that 74% of student comments in the online graduate course pertaining to “the best aspects of the course” (this, taught by the instructor who taught the face-to-face undergraduate sections) were in the areas of “interesting material/assignments” and “structured, clear & manageable expectations”. The other instructor, who taught the online undergraduate course, received 65% of comments in these two areas; whereas, the instructor who taught the face-to-face and the online graduate course mentioned above received 33% of comments in the area of “interesting material/assignments” and received no comments in the area of “structured, clear & manageable expectations” in his/her face-to-face sections.

On the flip side, 57% of student comments in the online graduate course pertaining to “changes that could be made to improve the course” (again, this taught by the instructor who taught the face-to-face undergraduate course) were in the areas of “better communication” and “more variety of assignments”. The other instructor, who taught the online undergraduate course, received 80% of comments in these two areas; whereas, the instructor who taught the face-to-face and the online graduate course mentioned above did not receive any comments in either of these two areas in his/her face-to-face sections. This was a very interesting discovery.

Practical Implications for Educators

This case study uncovered differences in the way online v. face-to-face students perceive learning. The themes identified in the online setting suggest that students distinguished the technical, mechanical, or what we might call ‘administrative’ aspects of instruction; whereas, students in the face-to-face setting expressed themes centered on the conceptual or theoretical aspects of instruction. Figuring out *why* students report such distinct learning themes in the two learning environments would be helpful toward understanding whether certain aspects of instruction need to be addressed to ensure online courses achieve the same pedagogical goals that are experienced by students in the face-to-face setting.

Faculty teaching online courses can record their lectures via lecture capture software, utilize web-conferencing to engage in discussions with students, and assign experiential learning opportunities for their students to engage in to learn beyond the classroom. Since both faculty and students enjoy the flexibility that online courses afford, steps should be taken to ensure that online courses are transformational and not transactional for students.

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Perceived Student Learning in an Online Environment

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