

Faculty and Student Perceptions of Online Learning: Moving From Emergency Practices to Effective Teaching Strategies

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Introduction and Objective

During the Spring 2020 semester, faculty at universities worldwide were forced to transform their face-to-face coursework into virtual delivery (Ali, 2020). The Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) practiced in higher education during this time differs from online learning. Instructors were transitioning content and teaching strategies to a virtual format and not planning courses with the best online education practices in mind from the onset (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). For many instructors, ERT was an introduction to online learning. During the Fall 2020 semester, universities adopted various course delivery approaches that included more online learning than prior to COVID-19 (Bhute et al., 2021). As the emergency situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic eases, the prevalence of online learning as a norm in many colleges and universities will remain (Daniel, 2020).

Many scholars have documented the impact and experience of ERT during the COVID-19 pandemic on students (Novikov, 2020; Perets et al., 2020; Shim & Lee, 2020) and instructors (Gares et al., 2020; Heldt et al., 2021). However, little research has compared their experiences. A deeper understanding and eventual closing of the gaps between how students and instructors perceive effective practice are opportunities to develop learner-centered teaching practices.

Our study objectives are to understand how student and instructor perceptions of online learning changed between the ERT Spring 2020 semester and the online learning in Fall 2020 at the University of Illinois, College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences.

Theoretical Framework

Instructors who practice effective teaching strategies are more likely to report a higher teacher sense of efficacy. Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) define teacher sense of efficacy as believing in one's ability to influence student engagement and learning, regardless of the students' motivation. During ERT, instructors may not have implemented the most effective teaching strategies due to the transition's limitations (Hodges et al., 2020). This study's practical goal was to glean information that would better prepare instructors for a future of online teaching, far beyond ERT. Therefore, framing through the lens of teacher sense of efficacy provided a longer-term perspective on upskilling and faculty development needs.

Methodology

This study used descriptive survey research to collect information from a target population, including all undergraduate and graduate students registered during the spring 2020 semester and those registered during the fall 2020 semester. The study also included all instructors on record for both semesters. Data were collected in July 2020 from the spring 2020 students and instructors and in December 2020 from the fall 2020 semester students and instructors. Spring 2020 response included 377 (17.7%) students and 86 (24.1%) instructors. Fall 2020 response included 336 (12%) students and 92 (23%) instructors.

Researchers adapted the Michigan Nurse Educators Sense of Efficacy for Online Teaching (MNESEOT) survey instrument (Robinia, 2008), an adaption of Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy's (2001) Teacher's Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSOES). The survey instrument included 25 items in the subscales of online student engagement, online instructional practices, and use of technology. In the student survey, students were asked to what extent the scale items were present in an average online course for the specified semester. In the instructor survey, instructors were asked how well they could include the scale items in an online course.

Results

Spring 2020 comparisons of instructor sense of efficacy to student experiences in online courses revealed many similarities between the student perceptions of their courses and their instructors' sense of efficacy related to online instruction. The Fall 2020 comparisons followed the same trends as Spring 2020 data: instructors' and students' mean scores on the scale measures were primarily ordered the same; responses to open-ended questions support the similarities.

A notable shift between Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 was an increased difference between student perception and instructor sense of efficacy related to responding to student questions during non-class meeting times. In the Fall, instructors ranked themselves better at responding, and students thought they were less likely to be responsive. An independent sample t-test revealed a significant difference between the means ($t(356)=4.39, p<.00$).

Significant differences between the means of student perception and instructor sense of efficacy found during Spring 2020 for the concepts of fostering individual student creativity, promoting positive group interaction, and utilizing the features of a learning management system were not found in the Fall 2020 sample. Similarly, independent sample t-tests revealed significant differences between mean scores of instructors and students in Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 for the concepts of establishing learning objectives ($t(353)=2.77, p<.05$), assessing learning objectives ($t(355)=3.54, p<.00$), providing timely feedback on assignments ($t(355)=2.89, p<.00$), and accommodating learners with special needs ($t(356)=4.88, p<.00$).

Conclusions

Denoting the Spring 2020 semester switch to online learning as an emergency response comes from the idea that any negative interactions during that time would add to the ongoing perception that online learning is less effective than face-to-face learning (Hodges et al, 2020; Meyers, 2002). This study reveals that students' perceptions of online learning strategies in the Spring 2020 semester were very similar to the Fall 2020 semester. Students and instructors identified the same strengths and weaknesses in both semesters. Future research should continue monitoring students and instructors' perceptions as students spend more time in online learning environments and instructors have more opportunities to enhance their teaching practices.

This study identifies similarities in challenges between face-to-face courses and online courses. The need to establish and measure clear learning objectives is the subject of many studies and training (Prøitz, 2010), and the need carries over into the online environment. Similarly, this study supports the existing research noting the importance of communication between students and instructors, especially during ERT (Shim & Lee, 2020). Perets et al. (2020) suggests that students may even require more personal communication during online learning than face-to-face instruction. Providing instructors with the skills and techniques to increase their communication with students during and outside of class time will improve the student experience and the students' perceptions of the course.

Implications

This study adds to the current literature on ERT during COVID-19 by (1) extending the researched period into the Fall 2020 semester and (2) comparing both student and instructor perspectives. As higher education develops a new normal in its balance of courses taught online and face-to-face, it will be essential to keep in mind both student perceptions and how student perceptions differ from instructors. This lens will help guide plans for effective course delivery and professional development opportunities for instructors.

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