AN UNINTENTIONAL CASE STUDY: HOW SYNCHRONOUS MEETINGS MAY INFLUENCE STUDENT PERCEPTION OF INSTRUCTORS

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ABSTRACT

A close examination of student successes and failures in online teaching can inform and improve future pedagogy. This reflective case study involves a close examination of how an online MSW course was conducted prompted by a significant drop in student qualitative and quantitative feedback in the end of term Student Evaluations of Teaching in Fall 2020. The main difference between that semester and previous semesters appeared to be the cessation of periodic synchronous meetings hosted by the instructor. In Spring 2021 the synchronous meetings were reincorporated into the course and both the qualitative and quantitative feedback in the end of term Student Evaluations of Teaching improved, suggesting a better student learning experience. Thus, the role of the students seeing real-time instructor interactions may strengthen students' sense of community, motivation to learn, and willingness to consider feedback. This has implications for the online student-instructor relationship and the instructor's social presence in the virtual classroom.

Keywords: *asynchronous online course, synchronous meetings, instructor social presence*

TEACHING CONCERN

I have been navigating online social work education for seven years. I have watched the rapid progression from disorganized online websites overflowing with written content to polished and consistent modules demonstrating Quality Matters structure and integrating adult learning pedagogies (Quality Matters, 2020). I have witnessed both educators and students learning to collaborate more easily as the technology to connect them becomes practiced and intuitive. I have also researched the online social work educator experience and recognized the perceived benefits and costs within virtual learning. Of course, some educators love online teaching and others struggle with the modality. What has not changed about teaching is the need for frequent educator reflection to refine personal teaching practices. As educators anticipate teaching online courses far into the future, it is important to learn from missteps. Reflexive teaching requires investigating teaching successes and failures (Douglas et al., 2016). In a Fall 2020 MSW course I made a small change that seemed to have a considerable negative effect.

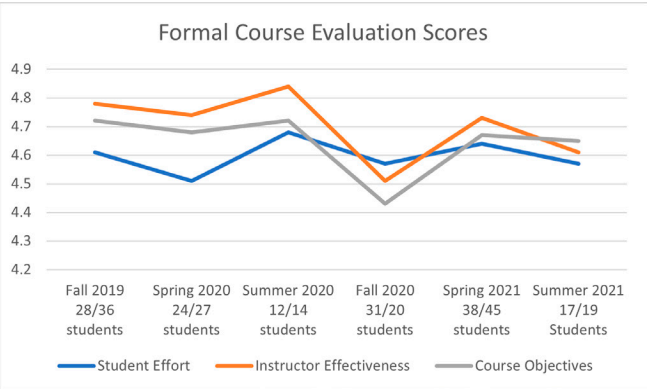
This asynchronous online course teaches social work theory and practice to graduate students. Prior to Fall 2020, I had taught the course eleven times. It is a demanding course that students complain has too much content, but even so, I routinely have positive quantitative and qualitative feedback in the end of term university student evaluations of teaching (SET). The average score on the 8-question Instructor Effectiveness scale of the SET for that class was a 4.78/5 (an average 67% response rate for eight class sections). The open-ended questions on the SET typically indicate student appreciation as evidenced by the following sample student comments.

Table 1. Examples of Feedback in Course Prior to Fall 2020

The professor was extremely invested in our success, taking the time to thoroughly offer feedback and getting feedback returned quickly. The feedback was quality and I learned from it. Class meetings (that were optional) were very helpful for me and solidified course content. Videos by the instructor that explained each module made me feel connected to the professor.
I really enjoyed this course even though it was probably the most challenging for me in the program thus far. I feel very accomplished for having done well in it and feel like I truly learned a lot of material that will be applicable in my work. I also appreciated the professor's genuine care for students and the opportunity to provide feedback throughout the course. This is the only professor that I have had do this and it was thoughtful on her part.
[Name] is an excellent professor. Her prepandemic style of teaching was already spot on, with weekly videos explaining the module to come, which is an excellent way to bridge the gap between in persona and online teaching. This is the hardest of my three courses this semester, with the heaviest work volume, but it has been the most rewarding and the one I've worried LEAST about, which is all because [name] has made things as flexible as possible, and as clear as possible.
[Name] was a great professor. She was available for feedback and was enthusiastic in her teaching. It is evident that she cares about what she does and is invested in her students. I learned a great deal of information in this class that I will carry with me throughout my professional career.

In early 2021 I received the results of my Fall 2020 student course evaluations. While the student effort scores were constant, the learning objectives scores and instructor effectiveness scores had both dropped. The average Instructor Effectiveness score was a 4.5/5 (an average 76% response rate for two class sections).

Table 2. Student Evaluation Fluctuation in Fall 2020



I sought clarity in the qualitative comments and while complimentary comments still existed, they were scarce. Instead, there were some of the harshest statements I had ever received from students, criticizing my teaching and dismissing their own learning.

Table 3. Examples of Feedback from Fall 2020

Having this professor was one of the worst experiences I have had in school for a long time... Her high demands made it so that no matter how hard one tried to succeed in this class, they could never meet her expectations. She took absolutely all of the joy and curiosity out of learning.
The professor's feedback on assignments was highly discouraging, which affected my learning experience. Her feedback regarding my assignments were very harsh and insensitive at times. At one point she wrote "LOL" on one of my assignments, which made me feel very devalued as graduate student—especially when the assignment was about MY experience.
The professor often posted a written description of the assignment while also posting a video. Rather than providing all the necessary information in the written description, there was always additional information in the video—it felt like a trick. If you only read the detailed written instructions and failed to watch the video you would not have the benefit of all the information.

As demonstrated, some students in this class experienced me in a vastly different way. They perceived me as cruel, impossible to please, only focused on grades, and even trying to trick them. I was really confused that a typically well received course and a typically adequate instructor could become so detrimental to students in so short a time. I asked myself what made that semester different? The pandemic is what first came to mind. Certainly, there was less shock and panic in Fall 2020 compared to Spring 2020; however, there was long-standing stress, worry, and accumulating grief. Students in Fall 2020 were exhausted even as people tried to take interventions prior to the help of vaccines. However, my Fall 2020 evaluations for a different course did not reflect this similar distress. What concerned me was the intensity of student dissatisfaction. I needed to understand this to improve my future courses and, perhaps, salvage my pride. So, I decided to investigate this more systematically through this case study.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Two pedagogical and theoretical ideas guided my investigation. As a clinical social worker, I rely

upon relational theory to understand my interactions with everybody: clients, students, family, friends, and neighbors. As an educator I rely upon the Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017) to foster students' actualization of their learning potential.

Relational theory is a clinical perspective that recognizes individuals are influenced by both their internal histories and their environmental realities, yet growth occurs through interactions with others (Segal, 2013). The relational theorist does not rely solely upon altering someone's inner experience (such as reframing cognitive patterns) or changing the environment (such as strengthening relationships or providing resources). Relational theory recognizes that it is within the context of relationships that people change and grow. Relational theory has been applied to education with an emphasis on expecting the instructor to recognize how their actions affect the students' learning experience and to be accountable for their own behavior (McCarthy, 2020). This theory requires me as an instructor to consider how my students are experiencing what I bring to the class. As I unpack the reason for their distress, I have to investigate not only my mental and emotional state but also my behaviors to explore how modifications made that semester might have differently affected students. I also must consider what my students were experiencing and how that could affect their perspective in the course.

The Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017) identifies five pillars instructors can use to foster adult learning: practicing empathy, demonstrating expertise, sharing enthusiasm, minimizing confusion through clarity, and being responsive to distinct cultural needs (p. 48). Adult students learn best when they feel personally invested in the material. This includes having a good relationship with the instructor and experiencing a positive learning environment. These authors have an entire chapter based on increasing motivation in online classrooms. I recognized numerous recommended strategies that I employed in my course, including allowing introductions, defining learning objectives, scaffolding learning activities, connecting learning activities to student values and goals, incorporating high impact teaching practices such as problem-based learning and case studies, using formative assessments, and delivering frequent feedback (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017). I also considered how these authors emphasized the need for an inclusive learning environment to foster growth and I reflected on how, for at least some of the students, this was not present.

The Fall 2020 student comments suggested that they were experiencing dissatisfaction with my interaction style and that lead to a negative learning environment. Relational theory and the Motivational Framework recognize that the relationship with the instructor is crucial for successful online courses. I kept both concepts in mind as I compared specific differences between this course and previous semesters.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Course Evaluations

Research about student evaluations of teaching are plentiful and often present concerns about their use. Because these evaluations can influence faculty promotion and retention, they can reinforce ineffective teaching and grade inflation as instructors' consciously or unconsciously seek to please their students (Radchenko, 2020; Stroebe, 2020). Student responses to formal course evaluations can be a measure of their satisfaction with the class rather than evidence that they have learned. Factors unrelated to changes in the course can lead to significant changes in evaluation scores, such as alterations to student evaluation questions (Peterson et al., 2019; Zipser & Mincieli, 2018) or student confusion about what they are rating (Clayson, 2018). Evaluations can transmit student bias about instructor gender and expected grades (Radchenko, 2020) and reify gender and racial inequities in academia (Rodriguez et al., 2020). So, while course evaluations are problematic as a reliable learning assessment tool or measure of instructor performance, the student comments can offer valuable insights into their beliefs and perceptions. When the wider context of the instructor's efforts and perspective are also considered, there can be value in trying to make sense of the feedback (Kornell, 2020; Zhu et al., 2018).

Social Presence

Instructor social presence, the contribution of how the person of the instructor is communicated, affects the tone of the online environment and the

learning of the students (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). In the online classroom this includes introductions—written or video—discussion boards, emails, announcements, videos, synchronous chats, synchronous meetings, group projects, and peer feedback, to name a few. While analyzing student experiences of classes that shifted rapidly online because of the pandemic in Spring 2020, Conklin and Garrett Dikkers (2021) found frequent instructor communication (with asynchronous videos and emails), instructor responsiveness, and instructor empathy to be strongly correlated with student experience of maintaining a close connection with their instructor and peers at that time. These methods may contribute to intentionally crafted online courses as well. The researchers noted that students highly valued synchronous meetings whether they could be present or watch after the fact (Conklin & Garrett Dikkers, 2021). There is stronger instructor social presence created when lecture recordings include video of the instructor speaking than when no instructor can be seen with the same recorded lecture (Rosenthal & Walker, 2020).

Problematic Online Instructor Behaviors

There is growing literature about the student perspective of online learning environments. Hazel et al. (2014) found that students were more likely to perceive their online instructors as rude or ineffective when they were dissatisfied with the instructor's communication, when they experienced diminished immediacy with an instructor (great psychological distance between them and the instructor), and when they perceived their instructor as someone they would want to interact with. An article by Vallade and Kaufman (2018) clarifies specific behaviors of online instructors that students found to be problematic. Four behaviors were each identified by over 20% of the respondents: refusing to help, late responses, no responses, and unprofessional behavior (Vallade and Kaufmann, 2018). While the first three could be more quantitatively measured, the idea of instructors being unprofessional might be more subjective and open to interpretation. These authors point out that some instructor behavior that might be overlooked in a face-to-face classroom may be perceived as more acutely negative in the online environment. One of the major overall themes identified as concerning to students was Instructor Communication Behaviors. This included both tone and consistency and overall engagement with the online class (Vallade & Kaufmann, 2018).

EXAMINATION OF THE PROBLEMATIC SEMESTER

Sensitized to consider how my students and I were influencing each other, with an appreciation for the need for effective instructor social presence and some potential wariness of course evaluations, I compared my Fall 2020 course to earlier semesters (Fall 2018, Spring 2019, Summer 2019, Fall 2019, Spring 2020, and Summer 2020). First, I will present the consistent similarities, then I will explore the one major difference.

The first data point to consider was the delivery of content and use of assignments as learning activities and assessment tools. Except for the addition of information about social theories, the module content did not substantively vary over this time. While there were mild fluctuations in assignments (papers turned into discussion boards, cognitive wrappers added to assignments, increased use of peer and instructor feedback, expanded student choice for learning activities), there were no major additions or assignment changes. In fact, the overall evolution of the course by Fall 2020 had fewer assignments with more specific instructions and more student-centered options than previous semesters.

The second data point I investigated was whether the learning of students appeared to diminish in Fall 2020, as a few students had indicated in their course evaluation comments and their perception of achieving the course objectives. This was not born out in the data from within the class. When the major learning assessments conducted during the course were compared across semesters, there was no drop in performance during the Fall 2020 semester. So, while students complained in the formal course evaluations about their learning, there was no corresponding evidence in the activity assessments that their learning had diminished compared to previous students. This suggests that while the Fall 2020 students were still learning compared to previous students, they were less cognizant of (and more dissatisfied with) their learning.

So, if there were no substantial changes in either the online course learning activities or the Fall 2020 student achievement of learning goals,

then the difference was connected to students' satisfaction with me as an instructor. This is when relational theory requires me to investigate both my inner experience and my external actions to consider how I affected the students. If I reflect upon my personal experience in Fall 2020, similar to most of my students and fellow educators, I was exhausted, disheartened, tired of the isolation, and mourning so much loss of life. My sensitivity to my students' distress had also become heightened during that year, due both to losses and to social and racial stressors and inequities being in constant evidence. Aware of the distress my students and I both felt, I attempted to compensate and attend to students by sending out more frequent announcements, expressing more active and intentional encouragement than previously, and by implementing more flexible late policies and opportunities for early feedback on assignments. Still, I reflected upon the fact that I seemed to have communicated a more negative element into my interactions with students.

Finally, I examined my methods of interacting with students and here is, I believe, the major difference. While this course is asynchronous and part of a larger asynchronous graduate degree program, I had long embedded a synchronous component. In 2019 I had integrated five synchronous meetings into the structure of my course throughout the semester, scheduled around student availability. Students could earn credit by either attending the live meeting or by viewing the recorded meeting and responding to questions within a week. This seemed to meet the contrary needs of encouraging live engagement while accommodating to the schedules of students who had chosen asynchronous learning. However, mindful of students' additionally stressful lives and weariness during Fall 2020, I had discarded the synchronous class meetings to reduce class demands on students. Instead, I sought to establish my instructor social presence with weekly announcements, instructional videos, discussion responses, substantive assignment feedback, and individual emails to explain concepts and answer questions. With the feedback from students and time to reflect, I have come to believe that removing these few chances to interact in an immediate way with me (or to watch me interacting in an immediate way with their classmates) was what lead to students' greater course dissatisfaction and harsher perception of me.

REFLECTION ON ROLE OF SYNCHRONOUS MEETINGS

Relational theory requires me to consider how I negatively affected the student experience in Fall 2020. The Motivational Framework of Culturally Responsive Teaching requires me to explore what may have diminished the sense of inclusion and positive environment in the online course that semester. A class is much more than a set of learning activities and assessment loops. Despite my efforts to communicate my presence through video announcements, prerecorded video assignment explanations, and written feedback, without the synchronous meetings, fewer students felt connected and validated.

Perhaps the loss of the synchronous meetings contributed to two detrimental factors: fewer opportunities for students to be "present" together and a more limited perception of myself as the instructor. Kaufmann and Vallade (2020) demonstrate that the instructor is crucial in facilitating rapport in the online classroom, but it is the interactions among students that can most strongly counter online student loneliness. By removing the synchronous meetings, I had taken away one of the avenues that facilitated student relationships with each other and myself. Without that method of connection, students were less satisfied with their learning and possibly more likely to interpret my efforts in a negative light.

While there was no direct measure of students' perception of me, the evaluation scores and the qualitative comments strongly suggest that for some of these students, they attributed more negative qualities to me than in previous classes. My teaching philosophy is grounded in my respect for the relationship as central to learning and my desire to foster students' personal motivation. Because content was not compromised by skipping the class meetings, perhaps my students' experience of me as the instructor led to their dissatisfaction and perception of impaired learning. Asynchronous videos by instructors have been found to enhance online student satisfaction helping students better understand the instructor's personality (Borup et al., 2012). While asynchronous videos were present, it is reasonable to believe that synchronous meetings offer an even larger boost to student understanding of instructor personality.

I typically offer students extensive feedback on papers and assignments, expecting the feedback

will help them improve their understanding and strengthen their future work. It is not uncommon for students to take feedback on assignments personally or feel disrespected and interpret a neutral tone as attacking (Taggart & Laughlin, 2017). With fewer opportunities to witness who I am and how I relate to students, it may be that more students were guessing at my tone and perceiving it as highly critical. Rather than witnessing my earnestness, humor, and commitment in "live interactions" with themselves or their peers, some of them were more likely to experience my feedback as critical or my motivation as sinister.

While some online students continue to prefer written feedback (Conklin & Garrett Dikkers, 2021), there is growing evidence of the value of video-based feedback. For some students, video-based feedback was not only more specific to their needs, but it also improved the relationship they felt they had with their instructors (Marshall et al., 2020). The video feedback felt more personal and allowed for the instructor's emotional response to show through, which greatly enhanced overall instructor social presence in the course (Marshall et al., 2020). I did not offer video feedback, but perhaps that would have been another way to help students get a better sense of me, even without the synchronous meetings.

An alternate way to think about this relationship between missing synchronous meetings and decreased student satisfaction is about how the lack of meetings affected me as the instructor. Oyarzun and colleagues (2018) found a significant relationship between high levels of instructor social presence and stronger recognition of student achievement. It is possible that because I was having fewer interactions with my students, perhaps I was also not appreciating their development and growth in the way that I had in previous semesters. If I did not feel as connected with them, I might have expressed this in my comments in ways I did not realize. Would students have then responded to such a difference in my personal tone? Perhaps it was I who knew my students less, rather than my students who knew me less.

ADDRESSING STUDENT DISSATISFACTION

The initial concern was trying to ascertain why students' satisfaction with their learning and with me as their instructor changed drastically. I came to suspect this was related to ceasing synchronous meetings in an asynchronous online graduate course. I wondered if reincorporating opportunities for synchronous meetings between myself and the students would correlate with improved student satisfaction. In Spring 2021 I reinstated the integrated class synchronous meetings. This was the only notable difference from Fall 2020. Reincorporating the synchronous class meetings into the Spring 2021 course appeared to have been effective at improving both the instructor effectiveness and course objective scores and the qualitative comments resumed to being either neutral or positive comments.

While no causation can be established and the fluctuation in all scores were minor, the evidence does suggest that students felt they were learning more and experienced me more positively during the semesters with synchronous meetings. Since the course content and student performance in learning assessments remained constant, this suggests that there is something about my "live" interactions with students (either witnessed in real time or viewed after the fact) that influenced how they perceived me. Perhaps those interactions helped them know that my feedback came from an earnest desire to see them succeed and that I had their best interests at heart in a way that was harder for students to know when they only experienced me through premade videos or written comments. When students did not perceive me as an available and friendly person dedicated to their learning, they could not maximize their use of the feedback I offered, and it became a sore subject rather than a growth opportunity. Alternatively, in the synchronous meetings I was able to help address points of confusion and students might have felt more confident in their own learning because of this.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ONLINE TEACHING

Online learning comes in all different forms. It may be that for some subjects completely asynchronous and standardized modules may be the most practical, and in other subjects asynchronous components will serve a vital role. Kaufmann and Vallade (2020) emphasize the need for future research to understand what technologies and methods better facilitate the connection students need in online classes. The extent to which synchronous meeting opportunities play a role in this

may be important to consider in crafting the most pedagogically effective methods of online teaching. Little research shows exactly what benefits synchronous course meetings can offer, but it may include student perception of instructor intent and personality. This perception of the instructor may heavily influence how students contemplate, consider, disregard, or devalue instructor feedback. It is possible that the synchronous meetings help students lower their guards to feedback and experience feedback as more beneficial and positive than negative. Perhaps laughing with an instructor or witnessing how the instructor responds to questions or student distress can help a student more closely anticipate instructor tone regarding feedback.

Amidst the evidence that a connection with instructors and instructor social presence facilitates student learning, it may be that synchronous interactions have a major additive value. With less guessing about the instructor's personality and more opportunities to appreciate instructor sense of self in the moment, students may be more confident and comfortable with being vulnerable in their own learning. As learning opportunities continue to evolve in the virtual environment, educators and course designers may want to find ways to prioritize synchronous experiences even in self-paced or module-based courses. These assignment adjustments reinforce my conviction that the student-instructor relationship is crucial for students to develop their skills and recognize their efficacy. This experience taught me not to underestimate the affirmation and anxiety reduction that a live connection can provide students. As much as online students benefit from being known by their instructors (Smoyer, et al., 2020), instructors benefit from being known by their students.

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