

Abstract

The Importance of Constructive Feedback in Developing School Leadership Knowledge and Skills with Online Courses

With an online course, relevant readings, sound activities, challenging assignments are vital to the learning process. These instructional components provide and present learning content to the student. Many times, this information remains strictly content for the student until the instructor clarifies, answers, elaborates, and then this information becomes knowledge. Relevant and meaningful feedback from the instructor is so important in the student's actual acquisition of knowledge and skills. Consequently, more research needs to be known regarding student perceptions and studies concerning the importance of constructive feedback from the instructor in online courses.

This study through a course survey investigates the educational leadership students' responses and perceptions related to constructive feedback by the instructor and student learning outcomes. The objectives of the study are to seek the importance of constructive feedback by the course instructor with online activities and assignments, the correlation of this feedback with student learning, and the specific students' perceptions pertaining to this topical area.

Introduction

Online education in educational leadership courses is playing a major role in today's university environment. Faculty members teaching these online courses need to know and apply the best practices of instruction and learning. Questions need to be asked regarding what key components in an online course take the information and content and transfer it into the actual acquisition of knowledge and skills sets for the student.

In this time of educational accountability and continuous improvement, further questions need to be asked concerning the importance and effectiveness of certain instructional strategies related to online education. One key strategy, constructive feedback by the instructor, is explored and analyzed in this study. To better understand the significance of constructive feedback in online courses, a study was conducted at a small private university in the Midwest. This survey gathered the educational leadership students' opinions and thoughts on these topical areas: the instructor's constructive feedback with course activities and assignments, the instructor's help in understanding the subject matter, the pace at which the material was covered was appropriate, and the instructor encouraging reflective thinking. The overarching goal was the students' perspectives of evidence and importance of constructive feedback by the instructor in an online course and its' relationship with student learning outcomes.

Literature Review

A very limited number of studies have been conducted on the importance of constructive feedback in university online preparation programs for school administrators. This research has focused on the general benefits that students derive from taking online courses. Getzlaf, Perry, Toffner, Lamarche, and Edwards (2009) stated that it is evident that feedback given to students by their instructors is an

important component of providing an exemplary online education experience. Yet, there is little research that focused on the key content and learning processes of providing feedback to online students.

Initial studies examined students' perspectives of the qualities that make an online educator exceptional (Perry & Edwards, 2005) and students' experiences with selected online teaching technologies (Perry & Edwards, 2006). In another study of graduate online learners, Wolsey (2008) discovered that students associated "complex affirmations" with explanatory feedback as constructive and very relevant to the teaching and learning processes. In another study of online graduate students in MBA programs, Asbaugh & Hornik (2008) emphasized the importance of feedback relative to higher student performance and satisfaction. Wolsey (2008) research, also, determined that feedback does not generally happen in real time (gaps in learning between instructor's feedback and student work), and consequently, it is even more important that the instructor's feedback in online courses be as effective and relevant as possible.

Several studies have stressed the significance of feedback being supportive, prompt, targeted, and constructive. Ragan (2007) studies, in particular, point to effective online instructors providing timely, quality, and appropriate feedback to support and facilitate students' learning processes. He continues by indicating best practices with online teaching centered around effective feedback. They are:

- Provide meaningful feedback on graded assignments with recognition of good work as well as specific suggestions for improvement
- Respond to students' concerns or technical difficulties quickly and provide contact information of technical support
- Peer assessment can provide additional feedback opportunity while reducing faculty workload (Ko & Rossen, 2004)

- Diagnose misconception without delay to avoid further misunderstanding, but explain with background information
- Provide timely feedback to comment, confirm, evaluate, or to question
- Provide additional important resources for further study and encourage students to use examples, real cases, or literature to support their views

In a recent study (Kelly, 2014) interviewed Rosemary Cleveland, professor of education and Kevin Kenard, instructional designer at Grand Valley University, provided several feedback strategies for online courses. These strategies focused on feedback being timely, conveying a positive message, and connectivity between content in the course and the students' professional lives. Mandernach & Garrett research (2014) is part of a limited amount of studies that concern itself with feedback in online education and increased student learning and satisfaction. Their study found that feedback be corrective and specific so students understand which portion of the task they completed incorrectly or which course materials they failed to understand. Feedback should reference assignment criteria so that it appears founded and appropriate. Finally, feedback should be useful and actionable; instructors should give suggestions on how to redress problems and make improvements in the next assignments

In summary, although there is some research relative to constructive feedback by the university instructor for online graduate students, there are a few studies written to show how the instructor's feedback can impact student learning outcomes in an online environment. Furthermore, there is limited research of students' perceptions of the effectiveness of constructive feedback as an online instructional strategy. This study examines the graduate students' perceptions of constructive online instructor feedback related to student learning and motivation.

Methodology

Participants in the survey study were graduate students in educational administration courses at a small private university in the Midwest. These participants were students who had taken courses as part of their completion of the Masters of Education program or as a fulfillment of the principal's license.

The survey instrument used in this study was developed by the university in order that students could evaluate the course and instructor. The survey is administered at the end of the course through an online formatted site. The survey consists of two basic sections. The first section of the survey contained "forced response" questions in which the students are asked to select from a list of responses. The forced response questions are set up in a Likert scale format ranging from "Strongly Agree" (value of 5 points), "Agree" (value of 4 points), "Neutral" (value of 3 points), "Disagree" (value of 2 points), and "Strongly Disagree" (value of 1 point). The student selected the response that was the most appropriate choice for that question. The second section consisted of open-ended questions concerning the students' suggestions for enhancing and commenting on the instructor and course. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses on the survey. Survey results were submitted through the university's data collection system with results eventually distributed to the instructor.

The study was designed to examine the educational administration students' perceptions regarding the importance and relationship between the instructor's constructive feedback with online activities and assignments and student learning outcomes. The overarching questions which guided the study's research were:

1. How valuable and significant did the students perceive the instructor's constructive feedback with online activities and assignments to be?

2. With the value of the instructor's feedback being examined through the students' perceptions, did the students' learning outcomes correlate and become evident with this feedback?
3. Did the students' perceptions in the open-ended questions further explain and answer the significance of the instructor's constructive feedback and student learning outcomes?

One hundred and one student surveys were used in this study. These surveys which were administered electronically over a two and a half year period were given to these graduate students at the end of the online course.

Results

The purpose of the survey was to retrieve the graduate students' perceptions and opinions regarding the importance of constructive feedback in the development of school leadership knowledge and skills through online courses. Some of the questions in the survey asked for a viewpoint pertaining to the importance of constructive feedback with course activities and assignments, other questions wanted students to provide their perceptions concerning the acquisition of student learning outcomes and other questions asked for open-ended responses and comments to enhance the course.

To understand the distribution of responses to the survey items, data from the survey's questions were collected and analyzed for the significance and correlation results. In the survey question written "The instructor provided constructive feedback on my activities and assignments", Table 1 shows the frequency distribution results related to the students' responses over a two-year span of offering online courses.

Table 1

Perceptions Regarding the Instructor's Constructive Feedback on Activities and Assignments

| Survey Item | n | SA % | A % | N % | SD % | D % |
|--|-----|---------|--------|--------|---------|--------|
| The instructor provided constructive feedback on my activities and assignments | 101 | 77 | 19 | 4 | 0 | 0 |

Note: n= sample size
% = percentage of response

Table 1 revealed the students' viewpoints concerning why they felt and thought the instructor's feedback was very significant. The results show the students saw the constructive feedback as being very valuable in relation to their online activities and assignments. Over 96% of the students felt the constructive feedback was imperative in the learning process and acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Another set of survey questions and responses are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Perceptions Regarding Student Learning

| Survey Item | n | SA % | A % | N % | SD % | D % |
|--|-----|---------|--------|--------|---------|--------|
| The instructor helped me to understand the subject matter | 101 | 66 | 27 | 7 | 1 | 0 |
| The pace at which the material was covered was appropriate | 101 | 70 | 29 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| The instructor encouraged reflective Thinking | 101 | 72 | 27 | 1 | 1 | 0 |

Note: n= sample size
%= percentage of responses

The respondents' opinions of acquisition of student learning outcomes in the course are illustrated in Table 2. Students clearly indicated that the instructor helped the students to understand the subject matter, covered the materials in an appropriate pace, and encouraged reflective thinking through their responses in Table 2. The results point to achieved student learning outcomes through the instructor's materials, interaction with students, and grading and evaluation items contained on the survey.

The correlation between the instructor's constructive feedback with activities and assignments and student learning outcomes was strong and positive.

Discussion and Conclusions

The students surveyed clearly indicated that constructive feedback by the instructor with activities and assignments was evident and a crucial aspect of the online course. As was the case in the research of Getzlaf, Perry, Toffner, Lamarche, and Edwards (2009), online students identified that an important characteristic of effective feedback is the clarification of timeliness, expectations, and structure and ground rules for the course. Recognizing the significant role that constructive feedback plays in online courses, this study's respondents offered strong viewpoints, suggestions, and priorities for the enhancement of these types of courses.

With online education, you do not have a hands-on classroom environment, thus certain instructional objectives, such as, constructive feedback take on a major role in the teaching – learning process of the course. Feedback is more than post-assignment commentary. When employed correctly, feedback can

impact students on a variety of levels. It helps direct what students should do with their time, how they should feel about their efforts, whether their motivation level is appropriate, whether they are meeting expectations, and more (Getzlaf, Perry, Toffner, Lamarche, & Edwards, 2009). In other words, when delivered effectively, feedback is a tool that develops cognitive understanding, motivation, and learning connections.

The positive correlation of constructive feedback by the instructor and the student learning outcomes in the study helped to respond to the study's key questions. Ninety-nine percent of the study's respondents agreed (or strongly agreed) that constructive feedback by the instructor was evident and significant. In addition, follow-up survey questions concerning student learning outcomes indicated a relatively similar percentage of positive results for acquisition of knowledge and skills within the course. Another point was students' perceptions in the open-ended survey questions further answered the importance of feedback and the students' learning. Participants wrote several positive comments pertaining to feedback in the course. Some of these remarks are: (1) The feedback for this class was detailed and individualized. It provided both reinforcement when correct and information when the mark was missed; (2) I truly benefitted greatly from this feedback information; (3) The instructor's constructive feedback was very specific and gave me great examples of what you do well and areas to consider and how one might approach things in a different way; (4) Great job with feedback; (5) (The instructor) helped us improve by giving constructive feedback; (6) Thanks for the push and feedback on the assignments; (7) This course met my expectations and the assignments and feedback were aligned with the learning outcomes; (8) I truly appreciated the feedback given on the assignments; (9) I felt I learned something from each project because of the feedback; and (10) The instructor's feedback was clear and generated improvement.

The results of the study illustrated that the students recognized the importance of constructive feedback by the instructor and its relation to student learning. The research in this study further brought out the specific avenues of increased learning outcomes, such as, understanding the subject matter, the learning pace of the course materials, and reflective thinking being encouraged. Knowing these areas of study should help educational leadership faculty to focus, expand, and enhance the constructive feedback component within online courses. Students in the Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) study suggested that effective instructor feedback can support students in reaching this higher phase of learning in which they apply their knowledge in practical situations.

There are limitations of this research. The study did not involve a large sample of graduate educational leadership students. Further studies should be conducted to gauge the perceptions from other school leadership preparation programs to discover similarities and differences in results. In addition, the survey could focus in on specific types of constructive feedback (ex: positive, negative, reinforcing, exemplary) and its' relationship to student learning outcomes. By further examination of these study areas, the results can aid in improving instructional strategies and learning outcomes.

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