
Academic Instruction at a Distance: An Examination of Holistic Teacher Perceptions in a Virtual High School

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine holistic perceptions of teachers in a virtual high school who deliver secondary instruction using an online format. The demand for equitable learning spaces to support both teachers and students have led to the increased demand of virtual schools. The questionnaire administered to eight online instructors in the same virtual program examined their beliefs about certain criteria which may or may have not impacted their delivery of effective, holistic pedagogical practices. The results showed three main themes related to: interactions with students, online successes and failures, and online teaching influences. Recognizing the importance of a holistic distance education, online academic instruction in secondary virtual schools must take into consideration such practices in order to create safe academic spaces for all students and educators alike.

Introduction

The online and digital space for K-12 learners continues to grow and evolve as the market shifts to create a more equitable learning space for innovation. With the advent of the Internet, distance learning opportunities have increased significantly, and the face of education has been impacted. Gone are the days where brick and mortar are the sole prospects for learning, and due to this seismic shift, educational offerings now include virtual schools (Miron & Urschel, 2012). Some early entrants into the online market were Florida Virtual School (FLVS), a state virtual school, and the Virtual High School (VHS), an international virtual school. These schools pioneered the offerings for distance education in the K-12 market and provided an avenue for teachers to expand their knowledge of teaching and learning outside of the traditional secondary brick and mortar settings.

As of 2014, nearly every state (30) has their own fully online state-run virtual school (Bryans-Bongey, 2015). Several states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Michigan, and Virginia) have mandated online learning requirements for students in grades 9-12 (Bryans-Bongey, 2015; Corry & Stella, 2012; Garthwait, 2014). Increased state participation in the virtual high school market indicate that students drive the need for this modality of instruction. In addition, the learning opportunities for students in these settings are numerous: students are able to learn at their own pace, the academic

setting can be anywhere at the click of a button, enrichment and varied courses may be offered, and students are also able to complete their education more quickly if desired.

Greater opportunities to innovate the online and digital learning landscape is also an attractive career prospect for teachers, especially as the demand for online courses continues to increase. Teachers discuss the desire for autonomy and flexibility within their area of discipline, are concerned with increasing state and federal mandates related to high-stakes testing, and their inability to make meaningful and holistic connections with colleagues and students. These same issues surface when teachers state their rationale for seeking career opportunities in virtual high schools but also include an even greater perk: there are opportunities to make the same salary or even higher scales of pay than in a traditional brick and mortar schools (Pandolfo, 2012) and have the convenience of never leaving their own home or office.

Literature Review

For the purposes of this article, a review of the literature is organized broadly into three areas to better understand academic instruction at a distance and to understand the holistic interactions between student and instructor: the demand for virtual schools, including their growing influence in the educative experience for today's secondary students; teacher perceptions of teaching in virtual schools; and holistic practices within this online educational service delivery.

The Demand for Virtual Schools

Reasons for increasing demand for online course options in virtual schools include access to courses for college and career readiness, such as Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB); dual credit; world languages; electives; and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) courses (Archambault, Kennedy, & Friedhoff, 2016). Other reasons include credit recovery, graduating on time, and adding course and schedule flexibility (Archambault, et.al, 2016). Other contributing factors to the increase in demand for online courses in virtual schools includes the use of the Internet to ease delivery of courses, online tools and software, and social media (Corry & Stella, 2012). Online courses change the focus of classroom practices from teacher-centered to learner-focused, empowering students to be more in charge of their own learning (Costa, 2013). The delivery of courses also support the evidence-based practices of providing educational options so parents have a choice in their child's learning experiences.

School choice places a high demand for parents, policy makers, and other school stakeholders to have a voice in legislating and regulating school spaces even in the modality of cyber schools. Close to a quarter of a million students are enrolled in full-time virtual schools. These schools are often organized as charter schools and operated by for-profit education management organizations (EMOs) (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp (2011). Proponents of school choice believe that there are intrinsic benefits in this method of schooling as more parents become active in selecting the educative choice for their students. Perhaps most importantly, school choice theory promotes that increased choice will force other learning institutions to increase their offerings to support a more global and market-driven competitive design (Finn & Fairchild, 2012).

Advocates for expanding virtual schooling claim that by using technology to enable teachers to communicate more effectively with more students, virtual schools can improve student learning and performance (Battaglino, Haldeman, & Laurans 2012), including access to teachers with more experience and opportunities for advanced coursework which students increasingly rely upon. Virtual schools also have enabled students in a geographic manner due to the convenience of attending school in their own home, and potentially saving the local school district money by the decrease in course offerings (Miron & Urshel, 2012). An example of this includes students at smaller secondary schools who may not have the opportunity to take AP coursework in economics due to the school not having the funding to offer such a course or a teacher with experience in the content. With the virtual school, the student can now take the course free of geographical or school

funding limitations (Queen & Lewis, 2011). This elimination of a significant constraint supports teacher to learner interaction which may impact teacher's feelings related to the virtual school experience.

Teacher Perceptions In a Virtual High School

Teacher perceptions of online experiences center around a number of factors: flexibility of teaching schedule or working conditions, access for students who might otherwise be disenfranchised, ability to use a variety of pedagogies and teaching methods, workload, and technology (Walters, Grover, Turner, Alexander, 2017). In addition, the required use of technology as a modality for teaching creates new responsibilities for instructors teaching online. These responsibilities include access to resources, student engagement, and development of resources (Walters, et.al., 2017). While most of the currently available research about perceptions of online teaching is from the post-secondary perspective, less is known about this in the K-12 setting as it relates to virtual schools (Rice, 2006; Smith, Clark & Blomeyer, 2005).

Moore (1989) analyzed online interactions of students in virtual schools and identified the emergent themes of learner types that are important in identifying teacher perceptions in virtual schools: learner-teacher (meaningful exchanges), learner-learner (exchanges between students), and learner-content (student's understanding and relationship with learning content). This is significant because it presupposes the three pedagogical relationships evident and allows teachers to share the centrality of such interactions (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999).

Further, according to the learning norms within this construct, teachers are able to make practicable strides in creating a learning environment that closely resembles the brick and mortar structure: sense of community, evidence of higher order thinking, an aspect of socialization, and an opportunity to make cognitive meaning through the teacher's facilitation (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p.161). Garrison, Anderson, & Archer's (1999) Community of Inquiry construct (COI), lends to this understanding that the perception of teachers in virtual schools must support the belief that the teachers' presence in creating such learning opportunities lend to higher academic achievement not found in traditional secondary schools (Finn & Fairchild, 2012).

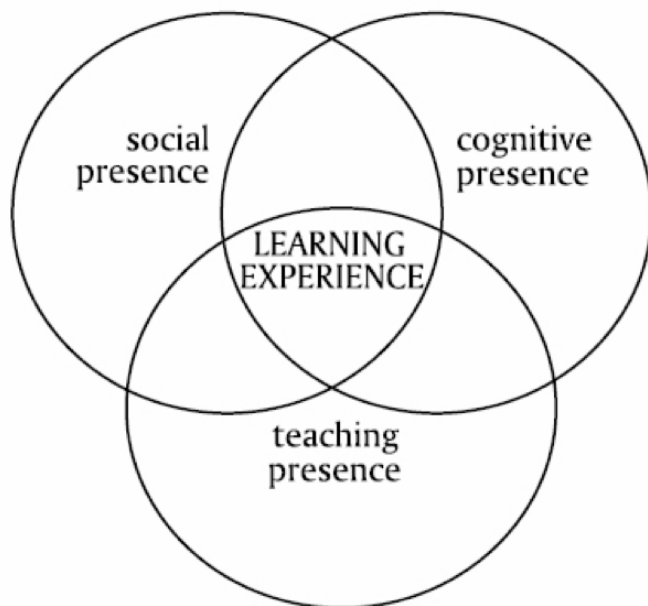


Figure 1: Community of Inquiry (COI) Construct

Conversely, the literature is also responsive in stating that there is data related to how teachers perceive certain challenges in virtual schools. Such challenges relate to student's concerns shared with teachers including teacher-student interactions regarding providing timely feedback and the

lack of social interactions (Weiner, 2003) sometimes leading them to feel ‘lonely or isolated’ (p.49). Such feelings support the nature of understanding how teachers in virtual schools offset these challenges, leading to practices that both support them and the students (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 1999).

Holistic Practices Within A Virtual School Model

The teaching, learning, and social interactions between student to teachers in virtual schools must lend itself to a balance of support and care within the learning community. Schools are charged with preparing students for a world that is ever changing. While thinking on the educative experiences of students in distance learning, the holistic approach is based on the view that in some way, even in the virtual environment, teaching must also be a social activity where the teacher develops the learner in a space where personal, professional, and academic needs are met. Not only do teachers teach the basics of their content, they are also required to ensure that students develop 21st-century skills. The definition of what encompasses 21st-century skills includes acquiring the knowledge and skills to become “flexible, creative, and engaged problem solvers” (Costa, 2013, p. 5). This means students must develop “higher-order, problem-solving, and critical-thinking skills” (Costa, 2013, p. 5), but also the ability to use technology in meaningful ways. Online courses fulfill this challenge by providing students with relevant learning activities that are academically rigorous, allowing them to explore the content in such a way as to apply the learning in a variety of contexts which fits their own learning styles (Costa, 2013).

Methods

Because few studies have studied the holistic practices of teachers in secondary virtual schools, we focused on online teachers’ reasons for choosing this modality of teaching to examine if we could generalize the current available research to high school online teachers. The survey was used to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent would an instructor be drawn to teach in an online program?
2. To what extent is the appeal of an online outlet for instructors?
3. To what extent has teaching online changed your face-to-face teaching?

For this research, network sampling was chosen to pilot a short survey to discern what online teachers’ perceptions are of teaching online and how to deliver holistic practices to support both instructor and student. Network samples involve referrals to participants representing good exemplars on the basis of certain pre-determined characteristics (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). In this case, this method of data gathering was chosen for the ease of identifying participants and quick return of materials. One author has a relationship with an online high school provider; writing courses and teaching for them for 15 years. Eight teachers who each teach at least one section of the AP economics course were sent the survey with five being returned for qualitative analysis. Because the participants all teach the same version of the course through a cloned template copy, it potentially reduces the level of bias because it presumes that each participant has roughly the same population and experience with students. It also allows the authors to focus on the research questions without concern that each participant experience is significantly different. The survey was emailed to all eight teachers with the five responses returned via email. One participant was sent a follow up email to clarify one question response. Table 1 details the demographic information of the respondents with regards to certification subject area, total years of teaching, and years of online teaching with this or other online outlets.

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant	Subject	Years of Experience teaching online	Years of experience teaching
TM	Secondary History & Economics	10	16
AB	Secondary Social Studies & Economics	15	20
HK	Secondary Economics	5	40
GH	Secondary Economics	6	15
CB	Secondary Economics	5	19

The authors developed a short survey that was sent to participants. The survey included open-ended, qualitative questions related to obtaining basic demographic information as well as perceptions of experiences teaching online. Using initial coding to break down the reported qualitative data into discrete parts (Saldana, 2009), the authors each individually analyzed the responses looking for individual themes that presented in the responses. The data were broken down and compared on a question-by-question basis looking for similarities and differences in responses. Once each researcher had analyzed the responses, comparisons and clarification of meaning across all researchers was done to triangulate the data into a meaningful analysis.

Results

The primary purpose of this study was to examine teacher perceptions from a virtual high school using a phenomenological approach. A summary of the general reported themes from participant responses is described in Table 2. Participant responses were coded based upon similar characteristics and common responses.

Table 2

General Reported Themes

Survey question	Reported theme
Q1: What made you want to teach in a virtual school?	There is a definite attraction to the online instruction modality. Variables reported include: (a) diversity of students; (b) portability; (c) technology; and (d) reaching students online
Q2: What subjects do you teach?	Secondary Social Studies & Economics
Q3: What teacher certifications do you have?	Social Studies
Q4: How long have you been teaching online?	Average of 7 years experience
Q5: How long have you been teaching totally?	Average of 22 years experience
Q6: How do you interact with your students? (through the course, IM, email, phone, texting)	Most respondents reported interaction with students via course tools and discuss course content including personal matters related to course transactions; independent learning opportunities.
Q7: Tell me some general experiences you have had in your online courses (successes/failures)?	Generally rewarding with flexibility and productive interaction with students including a more independent learner is fostered. Challenges reported include cheating and time management including general maturity of the student.
Q8: Has the online teaching experience in a virtual school changed the way you teach in the traditional classroom? How?	A general positive experience reporting variables including: new resource material in addition to collaboration with colleagues, reaching more students; increased confidence as an instructor with a deeper sense of understanding of course content, and increased feedback to students including stronger organizational skills.

Of the findings, three significant themes emerged: a) interaction with students; b) online successes and failures; and c) online teaching influences. The themes identified included characteristics related towards daily interactions with secondary students, successes and failures in and out of the classroom, and influences among the instructor teaching approach and style. Common responses were summarized as the reported theme of each question in Table 2. Excluding the demographic information in questions two through five, the three significant themes were discovered. As such, the reported online instructor perspectives identify unique experiences among the virtual high school setting. The resulting primary themes provide insight toward holistic teacher experiences within a virtual high school.

Interactions with Students

In a traditional, brick and mortar classroom forum or even a face-to-face hybrid classroom, there is the dynamic that is automatically present. From the first interaction with students as they walk through the classroom door, to the moment they leave the class session, there is verbal and nonverbal interactions throughout these class forums. Online class sessions have the potential to

present similar characteristics as the face-to-face classroom. Similar characteristics described by the participants supported interactions with students as the most rewarding and most accepting aspect of their position. For example, participant GH reported via question (Q6) online interaction capabilities as, ‘through the course (VHS) private messaging service primarily and discussion boards’. Additionally, participant GH reports ‘housekeeping’ (Q6) interactions as daily interactions including:

Generally the interactions are “housekeeping” issues related to the course (i.e. absences, resetting assignments, technical issues with the website). Personal interactions are mainly due to concerns about student performance. This could be inquiries about why they are failing behind/poor performance and to offer encouragement or to give “kudos” for excellence on various assignments. Other interactions are related to passing on content related information in “blasts” to all students.

Ferdig, Cavanaugh, DiPietro, Black & Dawson (2009) indicated that in order to impact the academic achievement of online students, feedback must be provided, and this manner of the daily housekeeping reminders supports this best practice. Teachers recognized the importance of responding to feedback to students in order for them to develop stronger organizational skills (AB, Q1).

Reaching students online was reported as an additional plus to the interactions between teacher and learner. While there may be a sense that there is a loss of the physical interaction, teachers reported that they do feel positive that they can reach more students in a virtual school (CB, TM (Q1, Q8)

Student interactions that were productive, flexible, and supporting an independent learning environment was also noted (CB, GH (Q7, Q8) .

Online Success & Failures

Whereas a challenge remains with lack of personal interaction with the instructor in terms of online course format (Waters, et al., 2017), AB reports utilizing technology in creating the ‘teacher presence’ (AB, Q7) through private threads and feedback given within assignments. This online success can be attributed to the notion of teacher immediacy (Ferdig et al, 2009). As a result, the use of virtual interaction increases in an online classroom; subtly reminded is the ‘loss of having a teacher in the room’ (CB, Q7). Technology applications such as online tools described by participant AB using private threads, has allowed for the presence of the instructor using distance means. These online tools may also be used to manage student records and support organizational interactions (Weiner, 2003).

Presenting different modalities of teaching in virtual schools to support teacher innovation and colleague collaboration was also a noted success. Teacher HK shared, “I really enjoy working through the online platform with a click of the button to get help from colleagues. It’s faster in a virtual school versus a traditional one (Q8).”

Additionally reported was the essence of time management, typically embedded in a face-to-face course due to meeting on a regular basis. In an online course, time management is a challenge experienced by most first-time, online students (Wilson & Allen, 2011). Participant GH describes ‘...time management [as] the downfall for these students...’ (GH, Q7). However, in the same response, participant GH reports as an online instructor time management is a challenge experienced resulting in the success or failure of the online experience:

...I would say I was guilty of the same thing myself at times. Staying on top of the grading of weekly submitted assignments and discussion board postings was a personal challenge for me (GH, Q7).

Significantly contributing to the common theme of online successes and failures were participant responses related to meeting student needs using virtual or distance means. In general, professionals in education meet students' needs in real time with face-to-face interaction; distance means present an additional challenge of meeting student needs within the face-to-face interaction. Participant TM reports concerns related to meetings student needs as a challenging experience:

I think learning to be very flexible is the hardest experience. Kids come with so many different backgrounds and needs. It can be difficult to give them all the leeway they sometimes really need (TM, Q7).

Online Teaching Influences

Various teaching approaches are applied daily in the classroom by the instructor. Pedagogical application becomes visibly different in terms of content delivery in an online classroom, however similar aspects have been made evident by AB in question 8 (Q8):

I definitely think it has changed the way I teach face-to-face. I tend to explain things a lot more. I discovered the first year I taught online where the holes are in my own knowledge about the content that I could often cover up by working at the board and drawing graphs, which cannot be done in an online course. I also give a lot of feedback on assignments (AB, Q8).

A common theme among participants included the influences from their online teaching approach when teaching face-to-face. With blending online and face-to-face components a regular routine in their teaching approach have proven evident. For example, HK stated in question 8 (Q8):

I have become a teacher of 'blended' courses with a meaningful online component melded into my f2f economics courses. This allows me, on the one hand, to deliver at a deeper level some of the nuances of the subject in the physical classroom knowing that the basics are adequately and properly covered in my own online material and/or, on the other hand, enlarge on the basic material in class as required after receiving online feedback (HK, Q8).

Additionally, participants reported influences upon their professional development within teaching. In question 8 (Q8) GH reported daily routines allowed for a deeper understanding of content knowledge as:

I think the physical act of writing down what you would normally orally present to students in the physical classroom has been important to the development of my content knowledge. This forced me to attain a deeper personal understanding of the content and made me a better lecturer in front of students. I credit online teaching for this professional development (GH, Q8).

Discussion/Recommendations

The current study examined holistic teacher perceptions in a virtual high school with special emphasis focused upon online instruction and provide additional contextualization of the COI model created by Garrison, Anderson & Archer, (1999). Using a phenomenological approach, the authors discovered three significant themes: a) interaction with students, b) online successes and failures, and c) online teaching influences. As a result, this study contributes to the current literature among online instruction provided in virtual high schools due to the direct insight the participants of the study.

In viewing the results from coded participant responses, it is recognized the secondary perspective in the current study does not represent all virtual high school online instructor experiences. It is a recommendation by the authors that primary perspectives be analyzed for comparison. The suggested comparison could yield further insight related to similarities including differences

between primary and secondary instructor holistic perspectives among academic instruction at a distance.

Accordingly, daily interactions as described by the participants provided personal and professional insight towards providing online holistic instruction. While the primary body of literature related to this topic has typically come from higher education sources, factors such as the freedom to teach courses they enjoy, flexibility of scheduling, reaching students who might be disenfranchised, and deeper learning of their own content as well as different pedagogical strategies are mentioned (Walters, Grober, Turner, & Alexander, 2017). Responses from these participants indicates that high school online teachers in virtual schools often cite some of the same reasons related to why they chose to teach in an online high school. This suggests some degree of generalizability of higher education research to high school online faculty. The following number of recommendations support continued explication of the virtual high school to encourage and foster continued positive learning experiences:

- 1). Continued technology training provided to teachers to ensure educational trends and best practices are followed.
- 2). Additional study of student's perceptions of teacher-student interactions in virtual schools to offer insight into the pedagogical exchanges within the learning community.
- 3). Accountability systems implemented in order to have stricter policies on academic dishonesty.
- 4). Scope of communication plan provided by teachers to inform students of feedback time and turnaround of grades in order to facilitate timely notification.
- 5). Continued professional development provided to teachers in order to enhance their pedagogical knowledge of their respective content area.

In order to elucidate the continued impact of holistic practices on teachers in virtual high schools, this study could include online teachers in different disciplines. This could support if there are discipline specific practices that others could glean from as a part of best practices. In addition, there are opportunities for students to engage in a self-study to share their perceptions of teacher-student interactions in the manner of the COI has been designed. This valuable information from the student's perspective could provide programmatic, curriculum, and student achievement outcomes that benefits equitable learning opportunities for all.

Appendix

Survey Questions:

- Q1. What made you want to teach online?
- Q2. What subjects do you teach?
- Q3. What teacher certifications do you have?
- Q4. How long have you been teaching online?
- Q5. How long have you been teaching totally?
- Q6. How do you interact with your students? (through the course, IM, email, phone, texting)
 - a. What are those interactions like (course content, personal)
- Q7. Tell me some general experiences you have had in your online courses (successes/failures)?

Q8. Has the online teaching experience changed the way you teach in the traditional classroom?
a. How?

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