Student Perceptions of Effective Educators in Online Learning

Erica Kelly,
Lambton College, Canada

Julia Colella,
Lambton College, Canada

Angela Sottosanti-Kusnir,
Lambton College, Canada

Abstract

This research project surveyed college students about their experiences with online learning in the aftermath of the move to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). Specifically, students reported on strategies they appreciate in an online instructor. While students shared varied advice for best practices, their responses confirmed what previous studies have found: especially in this moment of post-pandemic learning, students value instructors who are flexible and empathetic. Additionally, our findings demonstrate that students value engagement (with their instructor, their course content, and their peers), flexible course design, clearly organized learning management systems, and regular communication. The opinions and observations students have shared in response to our questionnaire, and the patterns across students' answers, are important for online educators to consider. This knowledge can be used to guide instructors aiming to deliver effective and engaging online courses. We recommend that instructors continue to check in with students about their learning needs and requests.

Keywords: Online learning; synchronous; asynchronous; engagement; emergency remote teaching

In the spring of 2020, many post-secondary instructors were tasked with moving their courses online immediately to allow students to complete their semester amidst unfolding health regulations. Since that abrupt emergency transition, many post-secondary students remain enrolled in at least some online classes. That time of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) helped many post-secondary educational institutions to recognize the potential benefits of online options, and now, more than three years later, many post-secondary students remain enrolled in at least some online classes.

The move to ERT required instructors and institutions alike to listen to student perspectives (Widodo et al., 2020). Even after the emergency period has ended, that responsibility remains: Considering students' insights and experiences can help instructors develop more successful online learning environments. Listening to students was the primary motivation behind this study.

We wanted to hear from students at our own institution during this time of transition: Which practices would they identify as helpful to their success? The responses students shared will help us to review and improve online course offerings. For the purpose of this study, we will use the term "online" to refer to course delivery that includes synchronous digital format, asynchronous digital format, or a combination of the two. This broad definition helps us to capture students' various experiences at this moment of transition.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, online learning was gaining in popularity. The number of students enrolling in online courses had been continuously increasing (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Burkle & Cleveland-Innes, 2013; Landrum, 2020), and online learning already "played a significant role in shifting the pedagogical, economic, and social landscape of post-secondary education" (Francis et al., 2019, p. 218). Cinar et al. (2021) suggest that "the number of students enrolled in online higher education programs is expected to rise in the future especially with the driving force of online education awareness that possibly occurred throughout the community during the pandemic period" (p. 177). Now that students and institutions are increasingly aware of the potential, online learning opportunities are likely to increase.

Online learning brings benefits in addition to its ability to allow students to continue to study safely during a public health crisis. Decades of research confirm that at its best, online learning can lead to innovative teaching, increased access, and improved flexibility (Bates, 2017). Francis et al. (2019) suggest that as the development of educational technologies and pathways toward degrees and diplomas increases, online teaching and learning can help to meet the needs of diverse learners. Learning about the factors that impact students' experiences of online learning, including the strategies that various course creators and facilitators have employed, can help instructors improve online courses (Kurucay & Inan, 2017). Bayrak et al. (2020) state that it is "important for faculty members involved in designing, developing and delivering online courses to seek the opinions and perceptions of online students about their successful learning experiences and share this information to advance the knowledge related to online learning" (p. 111). Listening to students' perspectives of online learning can help instructors better communicate course design decisions with students. As more classes move to an online or hybrid/high-flex model in the aftermath of the pandemic, it will be important to help faculty prepare to meet students' needs, and that preparation should begin with student input.

Literature Review

Recent ERT research confirms that learner engagement is central to successful online courses (Boardman et al., 2021; Castro & George, 2021; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021). The isolation felt during the health crisis may have helped students to more immediately recognize the importance of connection, but even before the pandemic, researchers identified engagement as key to online success. The research repeatedly demonstrates that students are more successful when online learning provides opportunities for interaction (Bolliger & Martindale, 2004; Jones & Blankenship, 2017; Yukselturk & Bulut, 2007) and, ideally, for genuine connection (Rose, 2018). Of course, the risk is not exclusive to the online environment; students can feel isolated and lonely while participating in in-person learning, too. In the online space, chances for connection must be thoughtfully implemented (Bolliger & Martindale, 2004; Jones & Blankenship, 2017). Online instructors are instrumental in facilitating student interaction.

ERT research confirms another long-established finding in online-learning research: Clear communication is key. McPhee and Lyon (2020) suggest that students want "clear and consistent" communication (p. 1). Regular personal communication and feedback helps students to stay motivated (Means & Neisler, 2021). Connected to clear communication, course organization is key to student success (Minichiello et al., 2022). Because the Learning Management System (LMS) becomes the interface for the learning experience, students will not arrive at the possibility for engagement and interaction unless the online course is carefully and clearly organized. Much research over the past decades confirms the importance of clear instructions and carefully organized material (Jones & Blankenship, 2017; Rose, 2018; Savery, 2005). Successful online instructors make their presence felt, checking in to the online learning space and communicating with students regularly (Heuer & King, 2004).

Students have questions and concerns about content, technology, motivation, interaction, and more, and in an online course, the instructor is often speaking to many of these concerns simultaneously. In addition to managing the pedagogical, technical, organizational, and social elements of the class (Berger, 1995), the online instructor is also expected "to act as a planner, a role model, a coach, a facilitator and, above all, a communicator" (Heuer and King, 2004, p. 6). Perhaps increasingly during the era of COVID-19, online students are also looking for empathy and understanding from instructors (Mcphee & Lyon, 2020; Minichiello et al., 2022). Because expectations are so broad and varied, hearing directly from students about which kinds of help are most important to them can help instructors design better online learning experiences.

We believe students' insights will be useful in guiding online educators in course planning and delivery. As Shim and Lee (2020) have noted, the move to ERT is not uniform: "methods of emergency remote teaching differ from college to college," and post-secondary institutions were at various levels of readiness to navigate this emergency transition. The result has been "various perceptions of the process and effectiveness of learning among students" (Shim & Lee, 2020, p. 2). Our aim with this study was to investigate students' experiences of online learning at our own institution: Our primary goal was to learn what students want from their online educators.

The student ideas and opinions gathered through this survey provide a sample of students' perceptions of online learning needs. Instructors can use this information to consider their current practices and adjust their content and delivery to better align with students' self-

identified needs, or, where appropriate, to be aware of the need to articulate reasons for divergence from those requests. We began our study with the following research questions:

- What do students want in an online teacher?
- Which strategies do they appreciate?
- Do students prefer synchronous or asynchronous learning, or a combination of both?
- Which practices from teachers will students say increase their chances of success?

Method

This study received Research Ethics Board approval. Participants were students (both domestic and international) at a college in southwestern Ontario, Canada, who were currently enrolled in at least one online course or who had taken at least one online course within the previous 12 months. In the fall 2021 semester, students received an email to their college email account with the study's description and a link to the Letter of Consent. This same study description and link were posted on the college's LMS. Two weeks after the initial email and message on the LMS, a reminder email was sent out and a reminder message was posted on the LMS. The full list of survey questions can be found in Appendix A.

The questionnaire was hosted in Microsoft Forms, which required students to be logged into their college account, ensuring that only registered students could participate and that no individual student could complete the questionnaire more than once. Student names were not linked to survey data. Remuneration included the option to link to a separate form to be entered to win one of three $50.00 gift cards to the college's campus shop. Participants were able to skip items if they chose to do so.

Results

A total of 350 students participated in this anonymous online survey; our college's total enrollment that term was approximately 4300, making our response rate 8.14%. The majority of participants (95.7%) were enrolled full-time, less than 1% were enrolled part-time, and 3.4% preferred not to answer. Eighteen point three per cent (18.3 %) were 20 years or younger, 30.3% were 21-24 years of age, 26% were 25-28 years of age, 24% were 28 years or older, and 1.4% preferred not to disclose their age. The participants were enrolled in various schools of study (see Table 1).

The survey explored student perceptions of preferences for online learning. The quantitative items included three demographic variables, namely enrollment status, age, and program of study, and eight close-ended items that asked participants to report their preferences for the following: delivery format, social engagement, features of course-meetings, student-instructor interactions, feedback and organization, weekly overviews and reviews, and technology. The last two questions were open-ended questions. These open-ended questions asked participants to share what they think an online instructor needs to do differently than an instructor who teaches face-to-face and any additional suggestions for online instructors.

Since we explored student perceptions, we used a questionnaire, which is a common means to measure attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions and is often used in educational research as it can inform teaching (Ary et al., 2002; Lauer et al., 2013). We analyzed our open-ended items

inductively using thematic analysis, which included "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6).

Table 1

Student Enrolment by School (N= 338)

School of Study	Number of Students
School of Business, English & Liberal Studies	123
School of Health, Community Services & Creative Design	91
School of Technology & Trades	57
School of Information Technology	55
Unknown	12

Course Delivery Format

Question: Please rank the following course delivery formats based on your preference in online learning.

Participants used a drag-and-drop scale to rank the following online course delivery formats based on their preference: asynchronous (working through pre-recorded lessons), synchronous (attending live lessons), and both (a combination of asynchronous and synchronous learning). The results reveal that the most common order for delivery format preference in online learning is asynchronous format, followed by synchronous format, followed by a combination of asynchronous and synchronous (33.9%).

Table 2

Course Delivery Format Preferences by Ranking in Percentages (N=342)

Order for Course Delivery Format Preferences	Percentages
Asynchronous, Synchronous, Both	33.9%
Synchronous, Both, Asynchronous	19.6%
Both, Synchronous, Asynchronous	15.8%
Both, Asynchronous, Synchronous	11.7%
Asynchronous, Both, Synchronous	10.2%

Synchronous, Asynchronous, Both	8.8%

Social Engagement

Question: How important to you is social engagement (connection with peers) in online learning?

Participants responded to this question using a 5-point Likert scale (very important, important, neutral, unimportant, and very unimportant). Almost half of the participants (45.7%) reported that social engagement in online learning is very important; on the othver hand, a handful of participants (2.9%) reported that social engagement in online learning is ery unimportant.

Table 3

Importance of Social Engagement in Online Learning in Percentages (N=350)

Importance of Social Engagement in Online Learning	Percentages
Very Important	45.7%
Important	24.9%
Neutral	19.7%
Unimportant	6.9%
Very Unimportant	2.9%

Support for Social Engagement

Question: Which of the following do you believe support your social engagement (connection with peers) in an online learning environment?

Participants who selected "very important, important, or neutral" to the previous question (How important to you is social engagement (connection with peers) in online learning?) were branched to this question. Participants were presented with four items and were asked to select all that apply. More than three-fifths of participants (62.2%) reported that they believe completing course work that requires them to communicate with peers is important for social engagement in online learning.

Table 4

Social Engagement Factors in an Online Learning Environment in Percentages (N= 278)

Social Engagement Factors in an Online Learning Environment	Percentages
Completing course work that requires you to communicate with peers (for example, group projects and group tasks)	62.2%
Being required to communicate with classmates through posting on discussion boards	10.1%
Being required to participate during synchronous lessons (live lessons) in the large group	9.4%
Being required to participate during synchronous lessons (live lessons) in smaller breakout rooms	18.3%

Course Meetings

Question: Please indicate how important the following items are to you regarding course meetings in online learning.

Participants responded to the next five questions using a 5-point Likert scale (very important, important, neutral, unimportant, and very unimportant). For the next five questions, the number of responses (N) is included under each item. Participants were presented with four items that focused on their preferences regarding course meetings in online learning. The item that was rated as the most important for course meetings is *the instructor starts the lesson at the exact start time;* 71% of participants reported this as very important (35.8%) or important (35.2%)

Table 5
Course Meetings Preferences in Online Learning in Percentages

	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Very Unimportant
The instructor opens the class meetings 5-10 minutes earlier. (N=350)	21.3%	35.0%	30.5%	11.4%	1.7%
The instructor starts the lesson at the exact start time. (N=338)	35.8%	35.2%	22.5%	4.7%	1.8%
The instructor stays on the class meeting 5-10 minutes after class. (N=341)	15.2%	29.3%	30.8%	21.1%	3.5%

The instructor the lesson at the exact end time. (N=333)	27.0%	26.4%	29.7%	13.2%	3.6%

Student-Instructor Interactions

Question: Please indicate how important the following items are to you regarding student-instructor interactions in online learning.

Participants responded to five items that focused on their preferences regarding student-instructor interactions in online learning. The first item includes "D2L;" D2L is the LMS that is used at the college at which this study was conducted. All of the five items were rated as very important or important by at least 73% of the participants. The item that was rated as the most important for student-instructor interactions is *the instructor encourages students' questions through any channel (D2L or Teams)*; 88.8% of participants felt this was very important (53.9%) or important (34.9%). Interestingly, none of the participants rated any of the items as very unimportant.

Table 6
Student-Instructor Interaction Preferences in Online Learning in Percentages

	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Very Unimportant
The instructor encourages students' questions through any channel (D2L or Teams). (N=349)	53.9%	34.9%	8.9%	2.3%	-
The instructor reaches out to students individually at least once during the term. (N=336)	42.0%	31.8%	20.5%	5.6%	-
The instructor holds scheduled office hours for students. (N=336)	40.5%	42.0%	13.4%	4.2%	-
The instructor makes time to check on students' stress-levels and wellbeing. (N=337)	49.5%	34.1%	12.5%	3.9%	-
The instructor makes an effort to get to know the students. (N=336)	47.9%	34.8%	13.7%	3.6%	-

Feedback and Organization

Question: Please indicate how important the following items are to you regarding feedback and organization in online learning.

Participants responded to six items that focused on their preferences regarding feedback and organization in online learning. All six items were rated as very important or important by at least 47% of the participants. The item that was rated as the most important for feedback and organization is *the instructor provides personalized feedback in written format;* 86.1% of participants reported this as very important (49.4%) or important (36.7%). This is also the only item that none of the participants rated as very unimportant.

Table 7

Feedback and Organization Preferences in Online Learning in Percentages

	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Very Unimportant
The instructor provides personalized feedback in video format. (N=344)	26.2%	23.0%	33.7%	14.8%	2.3%
The instructor provides personalized feedback in audio format. (N=336)	19.9%	27.4%	34.8%	14.9%	3.0%
The instructor provides personalized feedback in written format. (N=338)	49.4%	36.7%	12.4%	1.5%	-
The instructor provides an overview at the beginning of each class. (N=336)	47.3%	36.3%	14.0%	1.8%	0.6%
The instructor provides a review at the end of each class. (N=333)	38.7%	39.3%	16.8%	4.5%	0.6%
The instructor includes a question period at the end of each class. (N=333)	38.7%	40.5%	17.4%	3.0%	0.3%

Overviews and Reviews

Question: Please indicate how important the following items are to you regarding weekly overviews and reviews in online learning.

Participants responded to three items that focused on their preferences regarding weekly overviews and reviews in online learning. All three items were rated as very important or important by at least 59.9% of the participants. The item that was rated as the most important for weekly overviews and reviews is *the instructor provides a weekly checklist to clarify the students' obligations:* 89.2% of participants reported this as very important (47.4%) or important (38.9%). This is also the only item that none of the participants rated as very unimportant.

Table 8

Weekly Overviews and Reviews Preferences in Online Learning in Percentages

	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Very Unimportant
The instructor provides a video overview of the weekly plans. (N=344)	25.3%	29.6%	29.9%	13.1%	2.0%
The instructor provides a written overview of the weekly plans. (N=332)	47.9%	41.3%	9.9%	0.6%	0.3%
The instructor provides a weekly checklist to clarify the students' obligations. (N=329)	47.4%	38.9%	11.8%	1.8%	-

Technology

Question: Please indicate how important the following items are to you regarding technology in online learning.

Participants responded to two items that focused on their preferences regarding technology in online learning. Both items were rated as very important or important by at least 62% of the participants. The second item, *the instructor shares clear policies around students' use of technology*, was perceived as more important than the first item; 72.6% of participants rated this item as very important (40.0%) or important (32.6%).

Table 9

Technology Preferences in Online Learning in Percentages

	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Very Unimportant

The instructor shares guidelines on how to use technology in the class (for example, how to turn the microphone on). (N=345)	33.9%	28.1%	24.0%	10.4%	3.5%
The instructor shares clear policies around students' use of technology during the class (camera, microphone, and chat functions). (N=322)	40.0%	32.6%	20.5%	6.2%	0.6%

Open-Ended Questions

Our survey concluded with two optional, open-ended questions. Our first question asked, "What do you think an instructor who teaches online has to do differently than an instructor who teaches face-to-face?" We used thematic analysis to identify five themes within student responses, each of which included subcategories: Engagement, Expectations and Organization, Communication, Teacher Traits, and Technology. We organize our findings here by prevalence, beginning with the topics that were most often recurring.

Within the theme of *engagement*, we identified three subthemes: *challenges, technology,* and *group work.* Respondents noted that *challenges* to engagement may be increased online. One student, for example, said, "Its much harder for the profs because they're used to having students in person to engage and participate in discussions so it's a lot less personal for them." Another said, "Find ways to encourage student participation in class. It seems harder to do. I don't find many students offering to speak up when the instructor asks a question." The inability to see class members prompted numerous responses tying engagement to *technology*: Student responses indicated that they recognize the difficulties involved in "understand[ing] where students are at in the subject without seeing their reactions." One student, for instance, said, "The professor who teaches online needs to ask questions after explaining a topic to get an idea if everyone is attentive because most of the students' cameras and audio is off." Some student responses addressed instructors' attempts to engage students with each other through *group work,* and these responses were divided. One respondent, for example, said, "I think that when teaching online teachers need to rely less on group work during class." Others, in contrast, said that online instructors should consider "Giving more group activities to increase the social connection between the students" and "make more breakout groups so that classes become more interesting."

Within *expectations and organization*, we identified three subthemes: *clear and consistent scheduling, scheduling reminders,* and *clarifying connections*. Student responses indicated the importance of making scheduling requirements *clear and consistent,* suggesting that online instructors should **"**Provide very clear information about what we are to be doing each week (homework, assignments, due dates) in an easy-to-read format" and should "be extra clear with instructions and expectations for the week. I find unclear instructions, timelines, and

expectations made school more stressful especially online where it is harder to communicate with teachers." Perceived disorganization in scheduling was linked to stress, and "They [online instructors] have to reduce the work stress for students." Students requested clarity around class format as well as timing: "Not knowing if your class is synchronous or asynchronous does not work for [the] student." Many student responses highlighted the importance of *scheduling reminders* for upcoming tests and assignments. Students indicated that **"Online instructors NEED to provide a weekly update on what is expected/due for each week,"** that "posted weekly tasks are extremely helpful," and that they appreciated a "list of whole week work like due dates for assignment." Respondents linked the possibility of becoming overwhelmed with scheduling demands to the specific challenges of studying online: **"Teachers need to specifically tell about each and everything because many of us have not been studied online so it is hard to remember everything without going to class."** Students also appreciated when instructors *clarified connections* in content across previous and future lessons. For instance, students noted **"The professor must provide an overview of the last lecture before starting a lecture"** and suggested that "before the class begins the instructor clearly identifies the objectives of the class," and "The professors can have a review section at the start and end of the classes which discusses about the work to be completed and exams and due dates coming up." Responses indicated students' gratitude for any reminders that helped them to confidently orient themselves in the class schedule.

Within the theme of *communication*, we identified two subthemes: c*onsistency and clarity,* and *direct access.* Multiple student responses addressed the importance of *consistency and clarity* in an instructors' communications: "Communicate more clearly," "Provide clarity regarding assessments and how they will be administered," and "Go over things more clearly." Students also noted an increased need because of the online format for instructors to check in frequently to gauge student understanding: "A professor who teaches online has to make more effort to collect the questions from students in class." Respondents requested that instructors check on their students not just collectively but also individually throughout the term: "Maybe it's complicated, but I would like professors to reach every student at least once during the term." Multiple respondents suggested that *direct access* to their instructors is essential to their understanding. Students recommended "anything that helps them [instructors] be more available despite content being delivered online … professors excel when they lend themselves to the students by making extra drop-in sessions available to ask questions and review the course content." Some responses noted that the switch to online learning increased the need for drop-in help, since "in person we could have asked directly the instructor."

Many student responses noted the importance of particular *teacher traits*, and within this theme we identified four subthemes: *understanding and empathy, caring and friendliness, patience and flexibility, and enthusiasm.* Students requested *understanding and empathy* and said instructors "should understand the difficulties faced by the students," and "they should understand that there is a huge difference between online and offline classes." The desire for understanding sometimes connected to students' efforts to balance multiple responsibilities: "They need to understand that students are working full time hours now, because of online schooling," and "I think they have to accommodate or compromise more often with the students home situations." Many student responses called for empathy: "The instructor should be empathetic towards problems faced by students," and instructors need to "support students, and

have the understanding that everyone has a life at home and when doing online classes at home- it's hard to 'leave home at home'." Students suggested that instructors teaching online need to demonstrate *caring and friendliness:* Respondents called on instructors to "be more friendly," and said the "instructor who is teaching online should be more friendly and cooperative with students." Another said, "Work harder to make connections with the students, in person you are face to face [and so] you build a more personal connection. Online you miss that kind of connection." The requests for understanding were often linked to practical calls to be *patient and flexible*. One student, for instance, suggested that online instructors must "be more patient and understanding, things may take longer online rather than if we were in class." Requests for a slower pace connected to both the content delivery ("professors need to teach the material a little slower in online classes") and the conversation. Students suggested that instructors must "Patiently wait for student to type out their question" before moving on. Student responses also noted the importance of *enthusiasm* for keeping students' attention: They recommend that instructors *"*Be enthusiastic." Another student wrote, "From what I've seen so far in online classrooms, it's critical that a teacher be enthusiastic about what they're doing, even if the class is virtual. Our 'inspiration' comes from them."

Within the theme of *technology*, we identified three subthemes: *knowledge, flexibility and understanding,* and *recording*. Many students' responses repeated the idea that instructors in an online setting must begin the course with clear *knowledge* of the technology that the course will require. Respondents said that **"**online professors must be competent with technology," and "A professor should know at least a little [about the] tech which they use." Some student responses called for *flexibility and understanding* from instructors when students face technology-related problems. Students called on online instructors "To understand that there are times that our internet connection is not working well," to "Be flexible around students' technical errors," and to **"**normalize struggles with technology." Many students shared that they were grateful to instructors who chose to *record* their synchronous class lessons. As one student explained, "With an online class we can record and review the lecture to refer back to. I found it super helpful in case I could not attend class or wanted to review [the] lecture for studying." For some, the ability to revisit recorded lectures gives online learning an advantage over the traditional face-to-face classroom space: "For me, instructors are more familiar than face to face coz he/she is more attentive actively respon[ding] to chats box comments and 2ly [secondly] we have recorded lecture so that we can repeat and use this [for] practice." No student responses indicated that making recordings available caused problems, but multiple students indicated that recording supports their learning: "I would highly recommend to ask each and every professor to record their lectures."

Our second question asked, "*Are there any other steps you feel online instructors can take to assist in your learning? What suggestions would you share with online instructors? Please keep your comments generalized: do not include specific teachers' names or courses."* Seven themes emerged from the participants' responses: technology, schedule/time, LMS and organization, review, clarity, engagement, and teacher traits.

The first theme, Technology, included four subthemes: *applications and tools, recording lessons, use of students' cameras,* and *pre-recording*. Participants shared that they prefer consistency in *applications and tools* that are used in their courses. For instance, one participant

acknowledged that "Different professor[s] use different browser/application[s] for their class which makes it difficult for student to manage. Please make sure that only 1 application like MS teams is used by everyone." On the other hand, some participants reported they prefer instructors to use different *applications and tools:* One participant shared "Use variety of technologies…" Another participant recommended "Utilizing technology to its fullest." Some students recommended *recording lessons* and suggested "keeping all the classes recorded." Participants shared that the recorded lessons help as they can go back to the lesson and review: "While at home there are distractions that wouldn't be there if we were in a classroom, it is nice to refer back to points we missed." The *use of students' cameras* is the third subtheme. Participants prefer not to have to turn their cameras on, and one participant shared, "Don't force camera use." The last subtheme, *pre-recording,* includes various preferences for pre-recorded lessons. Some participants suggested pre-recorded lessons: "More pre-recorded video lessons!" and "Pre-recorded video lessons." Others suggested not using pre-recorded lessons: "Please take live classes rather than pre-recorded modules."

Another theme that participants discussed was Scheduling/Time. Three subthemes were present: *time differences, breaks*, and *delivery format*. In the *time differences* subtheme, participants noted that it is important to consider the time zone when scheduling classes. One participant shared that "Most of the instructors fix their classes in Canadian which makes us not to be able to participate in the live classes." Another participant added, "Am not yet in Canada and time indifference is a major problem." The second subtheme is *breaks.* One participant suggested, "Slightly longer breaks," and another participant shared, "Give breaks if lecture is too long." In the third subtheme, *delivery format,* one participant suggested that "Asynchronous professors could probably offer a hour or two drop in room if a student has questions about content," and another shared, "If possible have drop-in sessions once a week or every other week for questions." Some requested on-campus classes, recommending "in person meetings once a week," and that instructors "Maybe have some classes once or week in the college. Because it feels like we don't know anyone [and we are] just sailing in our own boat alone."

The third theme, LMS and Organization, included three subthemes: *weekly checklists, notifications,* and *calendar dates.* Participants shared the following suggestions for *weekly checklists*: "Provide weekly checklists as online classes sometimes are chaotic to organize," and "Professors can upload a written form of a to-do checklist (weekly) on d2l so that students can not miss out on anything important." Students also requested *notifications*: "Biggest thing for me would be D2L having more notifications when instructors update or add new content" Another participant shared they "prefer being able to reach out in [Microsoft] Teams. I can get notifications to my phone" The final subtheme was *calendar dates.* Participants prefer due dates to be available on the LMS. One participant's suggestion is to "Provide dates on calendar of when assignments are due." Another participant suggested instructors "Keep the calendars updated on d2l for external calendar apps."

The theme of Review included three subthemes: *study guides and extra resources, reviewing answers*, and *quizzes.* Participants shared they would like instructors to provide *study guides and extra resources*, and one participant explained that "Providing some sort of study guide is very useful when trying to learn through a computer." Participants suggested they want instructors to *review answers* to coursework, quizzes, and tests; instructors can "share and

discuss the correct answers after the quiz or tests," "take up coursework so we know we're on the right track," and provide "review of exams and tests." The final subtheme was *quizzes*. One participant noted that "Nongraded surprise quiz can help them [instructors] to understand students learning things that they are teaching." Another participant added that "Could be helpful if they provide some kind of mock test to practice before every test."

The fifth theme is Clarity, which included two subthemes: *instructions* and *content.* Participants revealed that they want *clarity in instructions* regarding coursework. One participant shared that "Instructors should clarify their assignment requirements and not be all over the place while trying to explain a query." Another participant suggested that instructors can "Explain assignment details better/more in-depth." *Clarity in content,* the second subtheme, includes participant suggestions that focus on instructors providing clarity in course topics. One participant suggested "Proper explanation of topics and methods as most students are new to this system."

The sixth theme, Engagement, included three subthemes: *engagement with peers, make it fun,* and *ask questions*. Participants' recommendations around *engagement with peers* were mixed. Some called for less group work: "I believe it would be better to do less work in groups so that I am not dependent on classmates." In contrast, other participants shared their preference for "more interaction with peers." Students also called on instructors to *make it fun:* "Online instructors should make the class content exciting, and they need to be more engaged with students." Another participant recommended "Also making more activities during the lessons to make them more entertaining." A number of participants suggested that instructors should *ask questions* throughout the class. For example, one participant shared that "I would suggest [instructors] make the online class more interactive by asking questions to the students." Teacher traits, the seventh theme, included five subthemes: c*onnection, feedback, teaching, providing support,* and *pace/workload.* Some participants noted the importance of *connecting* with their instructors. Participants explained that "If they could connect more with us and understand our situation, that would be great," and suggested that "They should be calling each student personally once a week to have a check on them." Participants' suggestions demonstrated that they value *feedback* from their instructors: "Providing feedback on our daily assignments is a great thing," and "Explaining the mistakes instead of marking right and wrong only." Some participants shared they want additional *teaching* from their instructors: "Have classes. I feel these teachers should have class there should not be one class that the teacher doesn't come online and teach the material." Participants requested *support* from instructors if an absence is required: "They can rearrange/reschedule a test or exam if a student has missed it due to some[thing] reasonable because it takes some time for students to get to know about culture and rules." A few participants suggested the instructor check in with students who miss a class: "In case of absence of any student, may be enquire about him/her. As many of the students face problem about housing/internet/any other and afraid to say so." One participant noted instructors can "Individually support students when possible." *Pace/workload* is the final subtheme. One participant shared, "If instructors could reduce the portions covered in a day, it would help a lot." Another participant added that "Learning should be a bit slower than its going."

Outside of the themes we identified, some participants provided their current opinion of online learning and instructors. Several of those comprehensive comments shared frustration

with online learning: "Make class in-class ASAP," and "Be in person, live classes are way better than trying to teach yourself." Other responses were neutral: students said, "Nothing is different," and "With tools like [Microsoft] teams, I don't feel the difference between remote teaching and having the teacher in front of me." There were more positive overall assessments of online learning than negative responses. Positive participant responses included the following: "Overall online classes have been great! I love being able to stay home, saves time and money," "I personally love the online portion," and "As of now everything is perfect in online." Some positive comments focused on online instructors specifically: "The professors are teaching perfectly," "All teachers are doing their best to teach us and to communicate with us," and "The teachers are doing a great job so far in online teaching."

Discussion

Many of the findings in our quantitative results were confirmed in the themes we identified in student responses to our open-ended questions. Students' answers throughout indicated the importance of engagement and interaction, scheduling and organization, clear communication, and certain teacher traits.

Engagement and Interaction

Throughout the survey, respondents demonstrated a preference for courses that engaged participants with course content, their instructors, and each other. A combined total of just over 70% of our survey's respondents ranked social engagement as either Very Important (45.7%) or Important (24.9%) (see Table 3), and just over 62% of students said that completing course work with peers is a Very Important (45.7%) or Important (24.9%) component of social engagement while learning online (see Table 4). Interestingly, students were divided in their ideas on how to best encourage peer-to-peer engagement. Some were clearly frustrated with the group work experience and advised against it, while others requested more assigned group work to help facilitate social interaction. Our participants' comments make it clear that they believe it is the responsibility of the instructor to create an environment conducive to participation. The emphasis on engagement is in keeping with previous research, especially in the ERT literature. Baloran et al. (2021), for example, call student engagement a "critical concern in online learning" (p. 3); while engagement is always important to learning, research suggests that interaction is the key determinant of student success while online (Castro & George, 2021, p. 29). When students are provided with opportunities to interact, they are more successful (Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Jones & Blankenship, 2017; Yukselturk & Bulut, 2007).

In an online format, engagement is always mediated through technology. Students' focus on cameras throughout our findings made that connection clear. Student responses repeatedly identified the difficulty of maintaining (or even gauging) students' engagement levels without access to body language, but many suggested that they do not want to be required to turn their camera on during live classes. That gap would suggest that teachers need to continue to explore strategies for engaging students. Clear technology policies and guidelines may help to ease student concerns around camera use. We found that more than 70% of students reported it was Very Important (40%) or Important (32.6%) for instructors to provide policies regarding technology use (see Table 9). Our findings support previous research (Francis et al., 2019; Heuer

& King, 2004; McPhee & Lyon, 2020) confirming the instructor's role (at least from a student perspective) in helping students with technology.

Scheduling and Organization

Our findings reveal that students prefer asynchronous delivery format, followed by synchronous delivery format, followed by a combination of both asynchronous and synchronous. Students recommended that class recordings be made available, echoing the results of previous studies (see Mcphee and Lyon, 2020). This finding is not surprising: Providing recorded lessons signals an understanding of students' busy schedules and conflicting obligations while also supporting individual students' need for additional review. Our participants shared that they appreciate class recordings that are tailored to their context, and they responded negatively to pre-recorded lessons that they felt were being recycled.

Organized course content makes it easier for participants to navigate through the work that needs to be completed. Previous studies found that clearly organized material is a factor in student success (Minichiello et al., 2022; Rose, 2018), and the importance of organization surfaced in our findings, too: More than 86% of respondents said weekly checklists clarifying students' obligations are Very Important (47.9%) or Important (38.9%). Our qualitative results confirmed that participants want weekly checklists. Weekly checklists are an optional function in our college's LMS; students have the ability to check off the items as they complete them, which may help with student motivation and organization.

Clear Communication

Clarity (in both instructions and content) was a central theme in student responses. Our results demonstrate that students value clear and consistent communication: The majority of respondents identified instructors' communication strategies (like inviting questions, checking on students' wellbeing, and reaching out to students) as either Very Important or Important (see Table 6). Communication surfaced often in responses to our open-ended questions, too. Other studies have similarly found that communication in online courses is essential (Jones & Blankenship, 2017; Minichiello et al., 2022; Rose, 2018) and that "Students value clear and consistent ongoing communication embedded in remote courses" (Mcphee & Lyon, 2020, p. 1). Our participants also valued reviews, study guides, and extra resources, which support student learning and foster relationships that can positively impact student success. Many participants want reviews at the end of their classes, which 78% reported as Very Important (38.7%) or Important (39.3%). Reviewing course content at the end of class can add clarity and can help the instructor and the learner to determine if further instruction is needed.

Feedback is another factor that can impact student success in online learning. Our results indicate that students value personalized feedback: 86.1% of participants identified personalized written feedback as either Very Important (49.4%) or Important (36.7%). Personalized feedback would seem to bring together many of the key priorities we identified in student responses, including a desire for engagement, communication, and understanding. Kandemir and Cakmak (2021) suggest that multiple types of feedback be provided in online learning, and our findings confirm this as some participants rated written feedback, video feedback, and audio feedback as all being Very Important or Important to them. Other research confirms the value of personalized communication: Boardman et al. (2021) recommend that instructors "Reach out individually to students to check in" (p. 9), and Means and Neisler (2021) found that students reported personalized check-in messages from instructors helped them to stay motivated. Over 70% of our

participants reported that it was Very Important (42%) or Important (31.8%) that "The instructor reaches out to students individually at least once during the term." Our findings indicate that students appreciate one-on-one check-ins from instructors, a practice that is likely to increase engagement and demonstrate the kind and caring teacher traits that students value, and again emphasizes the importance of clear communication.

Teacher Traits

Engagement is, in part, about humanizing the classroom, making students feel individually welcomed and necessary to the learning process. Humanizing the instructor can be equally important. Carter et al. (2014) suggest that "Every effort should be made to ensure that the human connection remains front and central in the e-learning experience" (p. 13). Students studying online are seeking "social presence" (Nguyen et al., 2021), and that presence extends to the instructor, too. Our findings confirm that students identify the instructor's social presence as key to their success: Their open-ended answers often noted that teachers who are kind, caring, friendly, and understanding help them to succeed. Our participants shared that it is important for instructors to try to get to know the students: Almost half of participants who responded to this question (47.9%) ranked this as Very Important, and an additional third (34.8%) said this is Important. Multiple responses to our qualitative questions emphasized the importance of the student-instructor relationship as the foundation for learning.

Students also want instructors to check on their well-being, which more than 80% said was Very Important (49.5%) or Important (34.1%) (see Table 6). These findings, in addition to requests for drop-in sessions and opportunities to meet weekly in a face-to-face format, speak to some participants' desire for opportunities to connect with their instructors. Empathy and connection may be especially important in our current moment: Minichiello (2022), in a survey of ERT-era research, found that "a common theme underpinning the growing pandemic ERT literature is students' need for faculty expressions of care and compassion" (p. 4). While calls for understanding and empathy may have been especially pronounced because of the additional challenges imposed by the pandemic, kindness and empathy seem likely to foster student success not only during moments of crisis, but always. Flexibility, a key practical indicator of an instructor's empathy, can help students to succeed (Kandemir & Cakmak, 2021; McPhee & Lyon, 2020; Minichiello et al., 2022).

Our findings confirm that, while there are common threads to student requests, there is also great variety among respondents. Strategies for engagement, clear and consistent schedules, regular communication and some room for flexibility according to students' needs all serve to demonstrate an instructor's empathy and kindness and are likely to support student success.

Limitations

- Self-reporting was used, which can lead to inaccuracies (Williams et al., 2008). Participants may have clicked through questions to complete the survey without reading the questions as an incentive to participate in this study was provided ($50.00 gift card to the college's campus shop).

- Participants were students at the college at which the researchers were teaching. Although the participants were informed that their responses are anonymous, they may have answered questions in a way they feel would be perceived as desirable.

- Participants may have responded with on-campus courses in mind. Although our questionnaire asked participants to consider their online courses when responding to items, participants may have considered both their online and on-campus courses or only their on-campus courses when completing the survey.

- Participants may have used the survey as an opportunity to vent. It is important to acknowledge that not all students enjoy online courses, and some students may have negative perceptions of their online courses.

- Participants' responses to the two open-ended questions (the final two questions in the questionnaire) may have been impacted by the previous questions they responded to.

Recommendations

Future Research Should Consider Students' Contexts

Students studying online are joining class conversations from a variety of settings, some more safe and convenient than others. Those varying circumstances inevitably impact the learning environment. Future studies should consider students' contexts and identities. Such work has already begun (see, for example, Means & Neisler, 2021). Research that considers the complexity of students' needs will help instructors to better contextualize information on students' preferences in online learning.

Focus Group Sessions Should Be Included in Future Research on Students' Preferences in Online Learning

Our study consisted primarily of close-ended questions (8 close-ended questions and 2 open-ended questions). Although our 2 open-ended questions allowed participants the opportunity to elaborate in their responses, focus group sessions may provide greater opportunities for explanation through an ongoing discussion among participants.

Instructors Need to Be Included As Participants in Future Studies

Instructors should be included in studies with the same objectives as this study. Gathering instructor preferences in online learning will help to determine if there are any discrepancies between what students prefer and what instructors prefer.

Conclusion

Not surprisingly, students were not unanimous in their recommendations. Respondents shared mixed opinions on what constitutes the best learning experience. While our findings demonstrate some commonalities in responses, individual student's preferences and beliefs may differ. It is likely impossible to create an online learning experience that is perfectly tailored to each student's individual needs; however, asking students about their preferences can help instructors tailor their courses where possible and appropriate. Landrum (2020) recommends that additional research explore the "collaborative aspects" of online learning (p.141). Listening to student voices—both collectively, through additional research projects, and individually, in the context of specific online courses—can help to build successful online learning experiences for

everyone. The results shared here provide a sample of students' perceptions. We aim to keep listening.

Note
To honour the voices of student respondents, we have chosen to represent students' contributions exactly as they were shared: We have not standardized grammar. Where necessary, we have included clarification inside square brackets.

Declarations

References

Allen, E., & Seaman, J. (2017). *Digital learning compass: Distance education enrollment report 2017*.
https://onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/digtiallearningcompassenrollment2017.pdf

Alqurashi, E. (2019). Predicting student satisfaction and perceived learning within online learning environments. *Distance Education, 40*(1), 133-148.

Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., & Razavieh, A. (2002). *Introduction to research in education* (6th ed.). Wadsworth.

Baloran, E. T., Hernan, J. T., & Taoy, J. S. (2021). Course satisfaction and student engagement in online learning amid Covid-19 pandemic: A structural equation model. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education, 22*(4), 1-12.

Bates, T. (2017). Results from the Canadian survey of online learning now available.
https://www.tonybates.ca/2017/10/19/results-from-the-canadian-survey-of-online-learning- now-available/

Bayrak, F., Tibi, M., & Altun, A. (2020). Development of online course satisfaction scale. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education, 21*(4), 110-123.

Berge, Z. L. (1995). Facilitating computer conferencing: Recommendations from the field. *Educational Technology, 35*(1), 22–30.

Boardman, K., Vargas, S., Cotler, J., Burshteyn, D., & College, S. (2021). Effects of emergency online learning during COVID-19 pandemic on student performance and connectedness. *Information Systems Education Journal, 19*, 1-14.

Bolliger, D.U., & Martindale, T. (2004). Key factors for determining student satisfaction in online courses. *International Journal on E-Learning, 3*(1), 61–67.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

Burkle, M., & Cleveland-Innes, M. (2013). Defining the role adjustment profile of learners and instructors online. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 17*(1), 73-87.

Castro, E., & George, J. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on student perceptions of education and engagement. *E-Journal of Business Education & Scholarship of Teaching, 15*(1), 28-39.

Carter, L. M., Salyers, V., Myers, S., Hipfner, C., Hoffart, C., MacLean, C., & White, K. (2014). Qualitative insights from a Canadian multi-institutional research study: In search of meaningful e-learning. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching*

and Learning, 5(1), 1-17. http://dx.doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2014.1.10

Cinar, M., Ekici, M., & Demir, O. (2021). Medication or Band-Aid? Revisiting university students' readiness for online education. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education, 22*(2), 176-191.

Francis, K., Salter, J., Costanzo, L., Desmarais, S., Troop, M., & Parahoo, R. (2019). Scribe Hero: An online teaching and learning approach for the development of writing skills in the undergraduate classroom. *Online Learning Journal, 23*(2), 217-234.

Gonzalez-Ramirez, J., Mulqueen, K., Zealand, R., Silverstein, S., Reina, C., BuShell, S., Ladda, S. (2021). Emergency online learning: College students' perceptions during the COVID- 19 crisis. *College Student Journal, 55*(1), 29-46.

Heuer, B. P., & King, K. P. (2004). Leading the band: The role of the instructor in online learning for educators. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning, 3*(1), 1-11.

Jaggars, S. S., & Xu, D. (2016). How do online course design features influence student performance? *Computers and Education, 95,* 270-284.

Jones, I. S., & Blankenship, D. (2017). Student perceptions of online courses. *The Research in Higher Education Journal, 32,* 1-9.

Kandemir, B., & Cakmak, E. (2021). Structure in distance learning: A systematic literature review. *Participatory Educational Research 8*(4), 139-170. http://dx.doi.org/10.17275/per.21.83.8.4

Kurucay, M., & Inan, F. A. (2017). Examining the effects of learner-learner interactions on satisfaction and learning in an online undergraduate course. *Computers & Education, 115,* 20-37.

Landrum, B. (2020). Examining students' confidence to learn online, self-regulation skills and perceptions of satisfaction and usefulness of online classes. *Online Learning Journal, 24*(3), 128-146.

Lauer, C., McLeod, M., & Blythe, S. (2013). Online survey design and development: A Janus-faced approach. *Written Communication, 30*(3), 330-357.

McPhee, S., & Lyon, K. (2020). Student voices on remote education in the COVID-19 era: Recommendations for fall based on student self-reported data. *UBC Remote Pedagogy Report,* 1-16. https://doi:10.13140/RG.2.2.28175.20641

Means, B., & Neisler, J. (2021). Teaching and learning in the time of COVID: The student perspective. *Online Learning, 25*(1), 8-27. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v25il.2496

Minichiello, A., Lawanto, O., Goodridge, W., Iqbal, A., & Asghar, M. (2022). Flipping the digital switch: Affective responses of STEM undergraduates to emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Project Leadership and Society, 3,* 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.plas.2022.100043

Nguyen, T., Netto, C. M. N., Wilkins, J. F., Broker, P., Vargas, E. E., Sealfon, C. D., Puthipiroj, P., Li, K. S., Bowler, J. E., Hinson, H. R., Pujar, M., & Stein, G. M. (2021). Insights into students' experiences and perceptions of remote learning methods: From the COVID-19 pandemic to best practice for the future. *Frontiers in Education*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.647986

Rose, M. (2018). What are some key attributes of effective online teachers*? Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning, 22*(2), 32–48.

Savery, J. R. (2005). BE VOCAL: Characteristics of successful online instructors. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning, 4*(2), 141-152.

Widodo, A., Ermiana, I., & Erfan, M. (2020). Emergency online learning: How are students' perceptions? *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, 513*, 263-268.

Williams, D., Consalvo, M., & Caplan, S. E. (2008). Who plays, how much, and why? Debunking the stereotypical gamer profile. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13*(4), 993-1018.

Yukselturk, E., & Bulut, S. (2007). Predictors for student success in an online course. *Educational Technology and Society, 10*(2), 71-83.

Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Section 1
Demographic Information
1. Are you currently enrolled in any online courses this semester at Lambton College?
   - Yes – branched to Question 3.
   - No – branched to Question 2.

2. Have you taken online courses at Lambton College within the previous 12 months?
   - Yes – branched to Question 3.
   - No – branched to End of Survey

3. Please indicate your current enrollment status.
   - Full-time student
   - Part-time student
   - Prefer not to say

4. What is your age?
   - 20 years or younger
   - 21-24 years
   - 25-28 years
   - 28 years or older
   - Prefer not to say

5. Which program are you currently enrolled in? (For example, Business Administration, Electrical Techniques, CPET, Photography, etc.)

Section 2
Online Course Delivery Preference Format
6. Please rank the following course delivery formats based on your preference in online learning. Drag and drop the items to rank them.
   - Asynchronous – working through assigned activities or pre-recorded lessons independently
   - Synchronous – attending live lessons
   - Both – a combination of asynchronous and synchronous learning (working through pre-recorded lessons and attending live lessons)

Section 3
Social Engagement in Online Learning
7. How important to you is social engagement (connection with peers in online learning)?
   - Very Important
   - Important
   - Neutral
   - Unimportant
   - Very Unimportant
8. Which of the following do you believe support your social engagement (connection with peers) in an online learning environment? (Select all that apply.)
   - Completing course work that requires you to communicate with peers (for example, group projects and group tasks)
   - Being required to communicate with classmates through posting on discussion boards
   - Being required to participate during synchronous lessons (live lessons) in the large group
   - Being required to participate during synchronous lessons (live lessons) in smaller breakout rooms

Section 4

Online Course Preferences and Instructor Characteristics

9. Course Meetings: Please indicate how important the following items are to you:

	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Very Unimportant
The instructor opens the class meetings 5-10 minutes earlier.					
The instructor starts the lesson at the exact start time.					
The instructor stays on the class meeting 5-10 minutes after class.					
The instructor ends the lesson at the exact end time.					

10. Student-Instructor Interactions: Please indicate how important the following items are to you:

	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Very Unimportant
The instructor encourages students' questions through and channel (D2L or Teams).					
The instructor reaches out to students individually at least once during the term.					
The instructor holds scheduled office hours for students.					
The instructor makes time to check on students' stress-levels and wellbeing.					
The instructor makes an effort to get to know the students.					

11. Feedback and Organization: Please indicate how important the following items are to you:

	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Very Unimportant
The instructor provides personalized feedback in video format.					
The instructor provides personalized feedback in audio format.					

The instructor provides personalized feedback in written format.					
The instructor provides an overview at the beginning of each class.					
The instructor provides a review at the end of each class.					
The instructor includes a question period at the end of each class.					

12. Weekly Overviews and Reviews: Please indicate how important the following items are to you:

	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Very Unimportant
The instructor provides a video overview of the weekly plans.					
The instructor provides a written overview of the weekly plans.					
The instructor provides a weekly checklist to clarify the students' obligations.					

13. Technology: Please indicate how important the following items are to you.

	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Very Unimportant
The instructor shares guidelines on how to use technology in the class (for example, how to turn the microphone on).					
The instructor shares clear policies around students' use of technology during the class (camera, microphone, and chat functions).					

14. What do you think an instructor who teaches online has to do differently than an instructor who teaches face-to-face? Please keep your comments generalized: do not include specific teachers' names or courses.
15. Are there any other steps you feel online instructors can take to assist you in your learning? What suggestions would you share with online instructors? Please keep your comments generalized: do not include specific teachers' names or courses.