



Using Qualitative Feedback to Make the Student Voice Count

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Whereas higher-education institutions have for decades systematically collected and analyzed quantitative student feedback about teaching effectiveness, limited progress has been made with respect to qualitative student feedback (i.e., student written comments). The current study addresses this problem by applying qualitative data analysis software to compare 16,582 end-of-term student written comments in on-campus and online courses at an Australian university.

Research consistently shows that student written comments and quantitative ratings are positively correlated. Thus, qualitative data can add value by helping instructors understand the possible causes of high or low ratings. This is especially true when attempting to interpret the meaning behind low ratings, which are more likely to be accompanied by lengthy student commentary.

Although qualitative data add value, logistical problems with coding, analyzing, extracting meaning, and reporting often stand in the way of full utilization. Fortunately, multiple software packages are available to aid in the process, e.g., CEQuery, NVivo, Atlas.ti, Leximancer, and MAXQDA. The current study uses Leximancer, which performs thematic and relational (i.e., semantic) analyses by recording frequency data and forming thematic clusters via visual concept maps. The main purpose of the current study was to compare themes found in students' comments in courses taught on campus and online.

The authors presented thematic results in four categories: a) best aspects rated by on-campus students, b) best aspects rated by online students, c) areas needing improvement as rated by on-campus students, and d) areas needing improvement as rated online students. Across both course formats four themes predicted positive student experiences: course design, assessments, quality of teaching, and student interactions with peers and staff. Ease of access to learning materials and flexible assessment methods were

additional predictors for online students. In contrast, connectivity with the instructor was relatively more important to on-campus students.

With respect to areas needing improvement, common themes across on-campus and online courses were problems related to the course and assessment methods. On-campus students tended to also struggle with time management, whereas online students desired more consistent communication and better access to learning materials.

The authors concluded by arguing that analysis and interpretation of qualitative data empowers students because it increases the likelihood that their voices will be heard. Software programs such as Leximancer are a useful way for colleges and universities to extract meaning from large volumes of data and thereby give voice to student perspectives.