

Attribution and Interpretive Content Analyses of College Students' Anecdotal Online
Faculty Ratings: Students' Perceptions of Effective Teaching Characteristics

by

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Bachelor of Adult Education, University of Alberta, 1995

Master of Education (Curriculum and Instruction), University of Victoria, 1998

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Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In the Faculty of Education
Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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This dissertation documents a mixed methods doctoral study that accessed a popular online faculty rating system situated in the public domain, to reveal adult students' perceptions of effective teaching characteristics in three community colleges located in British Columbia, Canada. The study is informed by two phases including a quantitative analysis of attributions and a qualitative interpretive content analysis of 300 randomly selected student anecdotal evaluations of their classroom experiences that were cross-referenced to the empirical research that formally defines effective teaching characteristics. Six attribution themes emerged from the students' online perceptions: Articulate, Competent, Content-expert, Empowering, Perceptive, and Trustworthy that in their complexity were re-articulated for latent symbolism and problematised through an adult education lens. These findings subsequently led to development of the ACCEPT Model of Student Discernment of Effective Teaching Characteristics.

The research findings contribute to a further understanding of students' ability to discern and report effective teaching characteristics through an online faculty rating system that is informal and less traditional, for the purpose of improving teaching and

learning practices in college settings in British Columbia. There are six recommendations provided that will be of interest to administrators, faculty, students, and institutional researchers regarding student evaluation of effective teaching characteristics and adult learning needs.

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In my years as an adult educator I have had the benefit of contact with truly professional teaching colleagues who have always been willing to share ideas about their adult education knowledge and classroom delivery skills. Without their willingness to collaborate, the Program in which we teach would not be as successful as it has been for over 35 years. I have learned much from these long-term relationships with colleagues who are my friends.

Students should always come first in our professional roles as educators and without them where would we be? I truly believe that to teach is to learn and my heart is filled with appreciation for the diligence and commitment I have observed in my students. Furthermore, I am grateful to students who have the forthrightness to access the Rate My Professors web-site and express their thoughts about their classroom experiences. Without their feedback, there would be one less opportunity for teachers to consider how to improve teaching and learning.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to educational administrators, educators, and students who are committed to the evolving improvement of adult teaching and learning. We have much to learn from each other.

*“Much have I learned from my teachers;
more from my colleagues; and from my
students more than from them all.”*

Babylonian Talmud
(2nd Century)

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The volume of literature written on formal student evaluation of teaching effectiveness is greater than any other single topic in higher education. Nuhfer (2004) contends that this is in part due to its “inherent emotional volatility that has led to polarized positions about the value of formal student evaluations in post-secondary settings” (p. 1). Hundreds of quantitative studies of teaching effectiveness have determined that formal institutional student ratings are generally both reliable (yielding similar results consistently) and valid (measuring what the instrument is supposed to measure) (Seldin, 1993). This data, in turn, has served administrators as an important component toward decisions that impact faculty rewards, career progress, and professional growth. But what actual impact do these student evaluations have on teaching and learning?

While effective teaching can be defined and evaluated through formal student evaluations for the purpose of administrative review, there is more to consider. Nuhfer (2004) believes that formal student evaluations are not just an assessment of specific faculty work being done, instead “they are ratings derived from students’ overall *feelings* arising from an inseparable mix of learning, pedagogical approaches, communication skills, and affective factors that may or may not be important to student learning” (p. 4). This important distinction in the purpose and use of formal institutional student evaluation has serious implications for college students. How is learning being affected by the presence or absence of effective teaching? What are college students saying about their classroom experiences that bears witness to student success or failure?

Research Focus and Question

To improve teaching and learning effectiveness from the students' perspective, educators and administrators in British Columbia's Community Colleges may benefit by looking beyond the formal, traditional, and statistical structure of student evaluations. They could also be significantly informed by students' authentic informal comments from a non-traditional source. This thesis used a mixed methods research design to interpret informal online student anecdotes about effective teaching characteristics and asked the research question: What can we learn from students' anecdotal perceptions of effective teaching characteristics, posted on an informal online faculty rating system?

Statement of the Problem

Analyzing students' informal online anecdotes about their classroom experiences and exploring the connection to empirical research is the next logical phase of investigation in the area of student evaluation and faculty rating systems. My assertion is based on Guba and Lincoln's (1985) declaration that:

Traditional evaluation approaches [are] bankrupt and doomed to failure because they do not begin with the concerns and issues of their actual audiences and because they produce information, that while perhaps statistically significant, do not generate truly worthwhile knowledge. (p.ix)

What is an Informal Online Faculty Rating System?

While students in post-secondary education settings have an avenue to issue complaint and opportunities to provide anonymous formal institutional faculty evaluation, some students question the effectiveness of these formal processes to initiate change in teaching practice and to assist the learner, especially when experiencing power relations in higher education (Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002). As an alternative, the current trend is for students to access an informal online faculty rating system aimed at rating their professor and either directing or forewarning their peers during course selection. Administrators, however, should perhaps beware! This online activity and the resulting peer influence could one day have an impact on enrollments and student expectations long before the classes have even started.

Rate My Professors (RMP), as a popular anonymous online faculty rating site, is increasingly accessed by post-secondary students across North America who compare, submit and revise online descriptions and ratings of professors based on teaching styles. The RMP site and rating system caters to students who openly and with minimal censorship provide anecdotal insights related to their personal classroom experience, good, bad or indifferent. Also, each entry rates the professor based on clarity, helpfulness, easiness, and hotness (for fun). In fairness and based on RMP guidelines, postings are only to be provided by students who have actually taken a course from the professor, and there is a limitation of one comment per person per course. RMP is an informal means of providing information to potential students who are 'shopping for' the best suited learning environment, based largely on peer opinion.

Otto, Sanford and Ross (2008) conclude:

Online ratings in their current form may be useful, even though possible abuses could limit validity in specific instances . . . and to the extent that online ratings can be valid measures to teaching effectiveness, online ratings have potential value. . . RMP ratings are growing in usage and popularity, and we think that they affect student decisions about which professors to take. (pp. 12-13)

However, Felton, Mitchell and Stinson (2004) caution colleges to consider the validity of student opinion surveys such as RMP, “. . . high student opinion survey scores might well be viewed with suspicion rather than reverence, since they might indicate a lack of rigor, little student learning, and grade inflation” (p. 1).

RMP has recently introduced a ‘faculty rebuttal’ link on the student comment pages to provide opportunities for both sides of the story to be told online. This addition may increase credibility to the RMP evaluative process for both students and faculty. Some may consider the RMP strategy innovative and unproven in this computer dominated age, and yet similar informal means of student endorsement or rejection of professors’ teaching styles and their respective courses have occurred for years. For example, to assist with course selection and suitability, Student Associations once published Academic Guidebooks for their membership that provided student collected data about individual course reading material and assignments, labs, professor’s teaching style, knowledge and helpfulness, and general comments regarding students’ level of satisfaction.

Furthermore, college students have traditionally gathered socially across campus and inevitably, through the student grapevine, discussed classroom experiences that range from motivated excitement, to shocked disillusionment, to outrage.

Generally, British Columbia college students have a reasonable expectation to receive a quality classroom experience. When that expectation meets, exceeds, or falls short of the mark, students believe they are justified to rate their professors both formally through institutional systems, and informally with peers, as experienced through an online faculty rating system.

Regardless of the quality control problems of RMP, education institutions should consider encouraging their students to post *responsible and respectful* ratings and comments on RMP; furthermore, higher education institutions should make their student evaluation of teachers (SET) publicly available online because by not making SET data available for students, the students will rely on what is publicly available, such as the RMP web-site (Coladarci & Kornfield, 2007).

Accordingly, www.ratemyprofessors.ca provides a rich source of data for this study of informal student evaluation of effective teaching characteristics.

Understanding the Nature of Informal Online Anecdotal Comments

As referred to above, skeptics may dismiss online faculty rating systems as merely a place for college students to vent and thus not give credence to what is actually being expressed. Some administrators and educators may choose to ignore and invalidate RMP commentary. However, there are two key reasons why this should not be done.

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge the phenomenological nature of the student

comments that are based on personal perceptions of professors and classroom experiences. Palys (2003) states that “humans are cognitive beings who actively perceive and make sense of the world around them, have the capacity to abstract from their experience, ascribe meaning to their behaviour and the world around them, and are affected by those meanings” (p. 9).

Secondly, the popularity of RMP should not be easily dismissed. It is abundantly apparent that for some time now the college generation (and younger) are cyberspace orientated and likely to frequent computer mediated sources to express their thoughts on anonymous sites. Students continue to speak volumes online (Garrison, et al., 2000). Perhaps it is beside the point that some administrators and educators choose not to listen.

Implicit in this study of student commentary is respect for individual experience and perspective, and the acknowledgement that previous life experience affects how individuals interpret or rationalize current life experience. The perspective, meaning, and significance attached to actions are considered as reality itself. Thomas (1928) states “perceptions are real because they are real in their consequences . . . indeed, those perceptions define our reality” (as cited in Palys, 2003, p. 9). This study drew attention to student voice in British Columbia colleges through an analysis of attributions and an interpretive content analysis of 300 online college students’ perceptions (and thus their realities) of their personal experiences in the classroom.

Locating Myself in the Study - - My Perceptions

To my mother’s recollection, parents of her generation seemed to entrust their children to the public school system and simply hoped for the best. Looking back and

knowing what I know now, my British Columbia public school K-12 education was for the most part quite fortunate. Knowing now how much worse it could have been, I value and appreciate what I received. I clearly recall my teachers and their influence on my development. I grew to understand that my mixed experiences, whether anticipated or not, constituted learning and influenced my human development. Whether teacher or student, I believe we are all diverse in nature, approach, and temperament. I also believe there is much to learn from and about our human interactions across our educational lifespan especially as we transition into the post-secondary educational system and become adult learners. In our diverse humanness, we can't help but be influenced by our earlier experiences. It seems that we carry our biases, motivations and expectations forward and as we grow, we learn.

Although I had other choices, I went straight from high school graduation to the workforce, and to marriage, then to motherhood. I finally undertook my post-secondary education in my late thirties to achieve a Bachelor degree in Adult Education followed immediately by a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction (Adult Education), and then after a few years, continued to a Doctoral Program. Simultaneously I taught full time in a college career program, contributed to various student-orientated college committees, and facilitated numerous faculty development activities. I speak with compassion as both a college teacher and an adult learner who has simultaneously experienced a broad range of professors of different ages, ethnicities, and temperaments. I am personally aware of and sensitive to the perceived and the real tensions between teaching and learning.

I have observed young adults in transition from their comfort zone and their familiarity of the high school routine, their teachers and their cohort, into a vast array of college experience that might range from inspiring to devastating. I have also noticed that older adults, who return to college after a lengthy time in the workplace, bring teaching and learning expectations based on their earlier classroom experiences and personal need. Regardless of their diversity and background, I believe students forward their earlier formed motivations and biases to their college experience and subsequently report their perceptions of effective teaching characteristics to their peers in a variety of ways, including the use of anonymous online postings. For example, the following comments illustrate contrasting student perceptions of teaching characteristics that are grounded in earlier educational experiences. These students have discerned between effective and ineffective teaching characteristics as compared to earlier experiences, otherwise, they may not have had a basis for comparison:

He is truly a respected master professor and I highly recommend you take all of his classes. He has a great sense of humour, gives engaging and memorable lectures and really motivates students to work hard and learn. He challenges you, supports you, and really has a passion for student success.

The worst professor I have ever encountered. Her plan of driving away every student seems to be working. My favorite walking oxymoron--the teacher that doesn't teach. Answers questions inconsistently with vague dismissive hand-waving and refuses to address marking errors. 12 people warned me, I should have listened. It seems that she doesn't really care about her students, doesn't like to give help outside of class time, and is generally unapproachable in class.

How do such informal evaluative comments reflect a broader (and true) understanding of effective and ineffective teaching characteristics? What can we (as adult educators) learn from students' anecdotal perceptions posted on an informal online faculty rating system?

Purpose of the Study

This mixed methods study accessed the popular informal online faculty rating system, ratemyprofessors.ca, to reveal students' perceptions of effective teaching characteristics in three community colleges in British Columbia, Canada. The study provided an analysis of attributions followed by an interpretive analysis of 300 anecdotal comments on college professors that disclosed the presence or absence of the characteristics of effective teaching. Student perceptions were interpreted in descriptive detail and linked to the literature review of teaching effectiveness for the purpose of improving teaching and learning in British Columbia's colleges.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Provide evidence of the students' under acknowledged ability to discern and report effective teaching practice to promote transformation in how informal student evaluations are viewed and applied within the college classroom.
2. Promote a greater acceptance of informal student evaluation as a credible and beneficial commentary to affect change.
3. Problematise, through the lens of adult education, ideas around teaching and learning in the college system.
4. Contribute to strengthening teacher-student relationships and classroom interaction to improve teachers' understanding of their students' learning needs.

5. Develop recommendations to promote characteristics of effective teaching.

Literature Review Synthesis

At one extreme, teachers contend that the informal Rate My Professors (RMP) faculty rating system is nothing more than a venue for students to vent and does not produce credible commentary. At the other end of the spectrum, students who have first-hand classroom experience report on RMP to guide their peers into what they perceive to be the best selection of courses and teachers. These polarized beliefs generate a complex argument about the credibility of informal student commentary to rate professors and to which there is currently no definitive answer in a positivistic sense. However, in keeping with my long-term commitment to students and to quality education, I believe we can improve the teaching and learning dynamic by listening more closely to what students are trying to tell educators about their classroom experiences. Informal on-line student evaluative commentary may be well aligned and credible in relation to the empirical data of effective teaching characteristics, which led me to my inquiry and the focus of this study.

To determine what we can learn from students' anecdotal perceptions of effective teaching characteristics, posted on an informal online faculty rating system, I prepared three guiding questions: (1) What is currently considered to be effective teaching? (2) How does the teacher-student power relation affect learning interactions? and (3) What are less traditional and comparable means of informal communication for students to evaluate teaching effectiveness?

In the Chapter Two literature review that will later be cross-referenced to substantiate the findings of this study, I examined three broad thematic areas: (1) Teaching effectiveness in post-secondary education, to provide a baseline of the empirical data on teaching effectiveness and to determine student discernment of effective teaching characteristics; (2) Power relations in higher education, to illuminate power in the classroom as a source of interference for student evaluation of effective teaching characteristics; and (3) Less traditional and comparable means of informal communication, to examine credibility for the less traditional, informal evaluation of teaching effectiveness, such as an on-line faculty rating site, Rate My Professors.ca. Within each of the three broad themes, there were a number of sub-themes discussed.

Teaching Effectiveness in Post-secondary Education

The first thematic area I explored in the literature was the broad area of teaching effectiveness in post-secondary education that served as the baseline to determine student discernment of effective teaching characteristics. In other words, the informal student commentary from this study was cross-referenced to the research on teaching effectiveness. Within this theme, five sub-themes that relate to the academic well-being and interests of students emerged: (a) dimensions of effective teaching, (b) authentic and credible teaching practice, (c) teaching practices that promote self-regulated learning, (d) perspectives on effective teaching, and (e) students' perceptions of the characteristics of effective college teachers.

Firstly, after conducting their factor analysis from past research, Patrick and Smart (1998) confirm that teacher effectiveness is *multi-dimensional* in nature and

comprise three critical factors: respect for students, ability to challenge students, and organisation and presentation skills. Based on institutional student rating systems, these dimensions of effective teaching are described frequently and historically within the literature (Brown & Atkins, 1993; D'Apollonia, Abrami & Rosenfield, 1993; Entwistle & Tait, 1990; Feldman, 1988; Lowman, 1984, 1992; Lowman & Mathie, 1993; Ramsden, 1991; Samuelowicz & Bain, 1992; Swartz, White & Stuck, 1990).

The second sub-theme reviews two closely related concepts, authenticity and credibility in teaching practice. Firstly, Cranton and Carusetta (2004) determine that the dimensions of *authenticity* in teaching practice include: self-awareness, awareness of others, relationships with the learner, awareness of the context, and a critically reflective approach to practice. Secondly, Brookfield (1990) defines *credibility* as teachers' ability to present themselves as educators with something to offer students and the absence of credibility could do more harm than good.

The third sub-theme, teaching practices that promote self-regulated learning (SRL), led me to the advocates of self-regulated design who believe that traditional learning environments are potentially counter-productive to effective teaching practices and may be in need of reform (Darling-Hammond, 1993; MacKeracher, 1996; van Grinsven & Tillema, 2006; Witteman, 1997). Zimmerman (2003) reminds teachers of their goal in the SRL environment “. . . learning is not something that can be done for students, but rather is something that is done by them” (p.22). The success of the self-regulated learner depends on the teacher's effort to promote the SRL experience (Randi & Corno, 2000). Authors also promote the need to set SRL conditions such as student autonomy; teachers, who are clear communicators and motivators, to influence student

outcomes; and appreciation of learning tasks (Bergen, et al., 1994; Boerkaerts, 1999; Deci, et al., 1981; Levy, et al., 1992; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986; Slavin, et al., 1985; Wigfield, et al., 1998; Wenzel, 1998). It is apparent that teaching effectiveness in self-regulated learning environments is influenced strongly by the teacher-student relationship. This is an important observation in relation to this study and will be discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

The fourth sub-theme discusses perspectives on teaching effectiveness from the researcher, teacher, and student viewpoints to shed further light on the complexities of the adult learning environment.

Firstly, researchers have closely examined the policies for and control of formal institutional student evaluation of teaching effectiveness. Also, researchers have analyzed college students' self-insight that provides some credibility for their meaningful evaluative comments (D'Appolonia & Abrami, 1997; Harrison, 1996; Marsh & Roche, 1997; Ramsden, 1991). While these studies do reveal student evaluation of effective teaching, they are limited in that they only refer to data derived from sanitized institutional teaching evaluation forms. However, these earlier studies do provide the baseline data to compare with the informal online evaluative data of this study for the purpose of establishing credibility for RMP commentary.

Secondly, teachers' viewpoints are disclosed through the analysis and the research of Pratt (1988) to determine five perspectives based on teachers' commonly held beliefs and values on teaching: transmission, developmental, apprenticeship, nurturing, and social reform. Earlier, Chickering and Gamson (1987) reviewed fifty years of research on the way teachers teach and students learn that led to the *Seven Principles for Good*

Practice in Undergraduate Education with content that has withstood the passage of time.

Finally, the topic of students' perspectives of effective teaching led me to Spencer and Schmelkin (2002) who examined the connection between formal student evaluation of teaching effectiveness and the student perception that faculty and administrators pay little attention to their ratings. Other survey studies revealed that students believe the formal evaluations are important and that they are qualified to rate their professors (Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002). It is encouraging that adult students have been surveyed yet unfortunate that they believe their ratings do not hold much weight. I can understand why students would then turn to an online anonymous source to get their evaluative points across to others.

The fifth sub-theme discusses the empirical research in relation to student perceptions of characteristics of effective college teachers. It proved challenging to find specific literature related to students' anecdotal commentary on effective teaching characteristics from either a formal or informal perspective, however I did locate three recent studies that are discussed more completely in Chapter Two.

Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, Collins, Filer, Wiedmaier and Moore (2007) conducted a comprehensive mixed methods analysis and validity study of a teaching evaluation form that led to the development of the *CARE-RESPECTED Model of Teaching Evaluation* and revealed students' perceptions of characteristics of effective college teachers (four meta themes and nine themes).

Otto, Sanford, and Ross (2008) conducted a validity study that investigated the pattern of relationships of online ratings and analysis that suggests online ratings in their

current form may be useful, even though possible abuses could limit validity in specific instances.

Pan, Tan, Ragupathi, Booluck, Roop, and Ip (2008) devised a method for quantifying students' comments from evaluation forms to increase their usefulness in complementing and confirming ratings. The findings indicate that students value teaching quality more than teacher characteristics, suggesting their ability to make valid judgments about teaching effectiveness.

The common underlying theme to all three of the above mentioned recent studies indicates that adult students' understanding of effective teaching characteristics are starting to be acknowledged more in relation to the impact in the classroom, and not just in relation to faculty tenure and promotion. This is encouraging news that further supports the purpose of this study and reflects Havel's (1978) 'power of the powerless' concept.

Power Relations in Higher Education

This study of student perceptions of effective teaching characteristics needs to be situated in an understanding of power relations, as this is a critical contextual element of such research. Any student evaluative commentary, whether formal or informal, needs to be viewed in light of the teacher to student 'power-over' dynamic. As the researcher, I needed to address how power may be operating within and influencing the evaluative process.

The second theme of the literature review explores Foucault's analysis of power (1977) as the theoretical framework supporting the reality of power relations in the

college classroom. Foucault's concepts of: sovereign versus disciplinary power, technologies of power, productive power, multiplicities of power, and power relations are discussed. The teacher-student power relation and how it affects learning interactions is also discussed in the literature from two perspectives: (1) as a source of interference, and (2) as a benefit to motivate learning. Other authors in the field of leadership provide excellent examples of the effective use of power in organisations (Kouzes & Posner, 2002) that could also benefit power relations in the post-secondary environment.

Less Traditional and Comparable Means of Informal Communication

The third theme of the literature review examines less traditional and comparable means of communication that may by comparison increase the credibility of students' informal evaluation of teaching effectiveness including: (1) the metaphor of water-cooler talk to explain the benefits of informal communication that places 'knowledge in motion' within organizations (Brown & Duguid, 2000; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Denning, 2001; Pfeffer & Sutton, 1999); and (2) the social presence of computer mediated communication to explain why the safe and anonymous on-line faculty rating system is an increasingly popular means of informal student evaluation of teaching effectiveness (Cutler, 1995; Garrison, et al., 2000; Henri, 1992; Walther, 1994; Weiss & Morrison, 1998).

Research Design and Procedures

Selection and Description of Sample and Site

Three of British Columbia's twelve community colleges were randomly selected and identified as Sites A, B, and C. Students' anecdotal comments about their classroom

experiences were then randomly retrieved from each Site's RMP public database with one randomly selected comment per randomly selected professor. As a result, a broad representation of classroom experiences in the areas of Arts and Science, Business, Health and Human Services, Trades, and Technology was accessed. Comments were linked to random courses that: (1) are typically offered within community colleges (academic-university transfer, career-vocational, trades, and technology); (2) are designed for adult learners; and (3) lead to associate degrees, bachelor degrees, certificates and diplomas. The randomly selected three sites are located in urban settings, with mid-sized student populations (averaging to approximately 20,000 students) with the majority age range of 18-39 years (*Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development Post-Secondary Central Data Warehouse Standard Reports –Age Group October 2008 Submissions*).

Mixed Methods Design

As a result of previously conducted mixed methods and quantitative validity studies that are discussed further in Chapter Two, researchers have provided both interpretive and statistical overviews of *formal* student evaluation of teaching effectiveness. Of these studies, none have specifically asked the question of what we [educators] can learn from students' *informal* perceptions about the characteristics of effective teaching, posted on a somewhat unrestricted anonymous website.

Onwuegbuzie, et al. (2007) notes that “. . . [assuming] colleges will continue to use student ratings to measure teaching effectiveness, it is surprising that there is limited inquiry to examine students' perceptions” (p.151). Otto, Sanford, and Ross (2008)

suggest that further research is needed to investigate and improve the conditions under which online ratings are construed; this may include an analysis of students' responses to open-ended questions that could be incorporated into the faculty assessment (i.e., interpretation of anecdotal comments). Pan, et al. (2008) concluded from their attempt to 'quantify' student comments, that qualitative interpretation of written student feedback is needed to augment and give meaning to the numerical nature of student ratings.

Guided by these scholarly references, I decided to use a mixed methods approach using an explanatory design (Creswell, 2005) in two phases of analytic treatment of the data: (1) Quantitative Analysis of Attributions, followed by (2) Qualitative Content Analysis using an Interpretive Analysis approach.

Treatment of the Data - - Explanatory Design (Two-Phases)

I first conducted an analysis of attributions followed by an interpretive content analysis with the goal of learning about effective teaching characteristics from informal online student anecdotal comments. Also, I linked students' key messages (the findings of the analyses) to the empirical research that defines teaching effectiveness. This data treatment and connection to the literature review was important to capture the level of credibility of the informal student commentary and is discussed more fully in Chapters Four and Five.

Phase One – Quantitative Analysis of Attributions

In context to this study, the students' choice of attributions (or adjectives) to describe the teachers' characteristics and teaching styles demonstrated their level of

awareness and knowledge of the concept of effective teaching (Krippendorff, 2004). To assist in the theming process of 300 on-line student comments, I first conducted an analysis of attributions that yielded a significant list of adjectives describing teaching characteristics that were either present or absent in students' classroom experiences. I later compared the students' range of attributions with the range of attributions housed within the literature review that defined effective teaching, to show which attributions were shared between the two sources. The congruence of the attributions from both sources and the concept of student ability to discern effective teaching characteristics are discussed further in Chapters Three and Four.

From this first phase of data treatment and the list of attributions, six distinct attribution themes that describe students' perceptions of effective teaching characteristics emerged: Articulate, Competent, Content-expert, Empowering, Perceptive, and Trustworthy. These themes then guided the broader and more complex qualitative interpretive analysis that, in this explanatory design (Creswell, 2005) was given greater weight than the quantitative analysis of attributions.

Phase Two – Qualitative Interpretive Analysis

The second phase of data treatment for this study required my interpretive inferential analysis of the 300 student on-line comments that was foundational to the research. My goal was to extend my thematic attributions analysis of the students' comments by rearticulating and interpreting the more *latent content*, defined by Berg (2009) as “the symbolism underlying the physically present data” (p. 344).

Interpretive analysis refers to the formation of theory from the observation of messages and the coding of those messages. Neuendorf (2002) distinguishes between interpretive analysis and scientific inquiry by stating “[interpretive inquiry] is wholly qualitative in nature and its cumulative process, whereby the analyst is in a constant state of discovery and revision” (p. 6). Chapter Three provides further discussion of the qualitative interpretive analysis framework also known as a hermeneutic circle (Krippendorff, 2004).

RMP provided a rich data collection of anonymous, multi-faceted and complex messages that were explicit and expressed either the presence or absence of effective teaching characteristics as described by the literature. In their complexity, individual comments were rearticulated through the lens of adult learning and problematised. In other words, rather than taking what might be considered common knowledge of the student experience for granted, that knowledge was posed as a problem allowing new viewpoints to emerge (Crotty, 1998). Rather than passively accepting the situations described by students, I stepped back from an immediate response, re-evaluated the situation and provided narrative to shed light on the students’ commentary from a renewed perspective that in turn may lead others to positive transformation.

Significance and Rationale of the Study

Why is this Study of Informal Student Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness Important?

Brookfield (1986) describes the mismanagement of student evaluation findings through the work of Guba and Lincoln (1985) who “launched an attack on what [Guba] regards as a national scandal, namely, the failure to use evaluation findings to improve

practice in any significant degree” (cited in Brookfield, p. 272). This study responds to Guba’s call by addressing this ‘scandal’; its recommendations will begin to lay the foundation for how such comments might be used for improving teaching and learning in college settings.

I was fascinated by the varied anecdotal excerpts viewed on RMP, and observed that adult students are simply commenting on teaching effectiveness that was either absent or present in their various classroom experiences. As a community college instructor with over twenty years of successful teaching experience, and as former Chair of the College Curriculum Committee and former Vice-Chair of Education Council, I immediately recognized the untapped potential of using the informal anecdotal comments as a valuable means of either acknowledging effective teaching or guiding improvement of ineffective teaching.

I was further encouraged by Brookfield’s (1986) contention that “informality and flexibility are not necessarily handicaps to valid evaluation, but rather they can be used as guidelines for framing distinctively adult educational evaluative procedures” (p. 274). In order to determine credibility of the student voice and to address the power relation between teacher and student, I first examined the literature that defines effective teaching, power relations, and less traditional communication, then through an analysis of attributions and an interpretive content analysis presented narrative evidence that students are discerning effective and ineffective teaching within their classroom experiences.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes analyses of authentic informal online evaluative student commentary that has not been prompted from a formal faculty rating system developed by adult education researchers, educators, or

administrators. This is important because post-secondary institutions could benefit from a rich source of previously untapped evaluative data that could guide and support effective teaching and learning. One of the goals of adult education is to develop critical thinking and independent thought, yet the means of attaining evaluative comments about effective teaching is comparatively restricted through the sanitized use of formal teacher rating forms.

From a research perspective, this study attempts to bridge the gap between our knowledge of formal rating system outputs and what is yet to be understood about the significance of informal faculty rating systems. Also, this study contributes to the research of student evaluation of teaching effectiveness in that it uniquely analyzes comments from an informal online rating system. Earlier studies rated students' expectations in their classroom experiences (Patrick & Smart, 1998; McKeachie, 1997; D'Apollonia, Abrami, & Rosenfeld, 1993; Feldman, 1998) however few, if any, specifically and directly investigated what students report through less traditional or informal communication methods, and if what they report echoes what the research defines as effective teaching. In particular, I learned that there is limited research of the interpretation of anecdotal online faculty ratings and teaching effectiveness.

Contributions to the Field of Adult Education

This study leads to a richer understanding of college students' learning needs based on the characteristics of effective teaching that are either present or absent in their classroom experience. Teachers and adult students could benefit from this study as partners in education. Furthermore, this dissertation reveals the under-acknowledged

ability of adult students to discern between effective and ineffective teaching and thus provide meaningful evaluation, which in turn may help to balance the teacher-student power relation in the classroom setting. McKeachie (1983) supports this concept recognizing that “students are in class almost every day and they know what is going on. They are the ones we are trying to affect and they have some sense of whether they are learning” (p. 38).

Nuhfer (2004) laments:

If educators had earlier called the questionnaires ‘student satisfaction surveys’ rather than ‘teacher evaluations’, we [educators] would probably be further along in embracing our students’ comments and getting the benefits from them rather than being stigmatized . . . the research shows that we [educators] are not good judges of ourselves, and we need the communication from our students to help define ways to serve them better. (p. 21)

Unanswered questions that emerged from this study may produce the basis of future inquiry. For example, it would be interesting to examine classroom power relations and the anonymity factor in relation to the use of informal online faculty rating systems over other methods of teaching evaluation. Also, it would be an ethical imperative to investigate informal student evaluative commentary that illustrates a dire lack of professional teaching practice.

Finally, in practical terms, this study provides educators and administrators with useful recommendations about the benefits of informal online student evaluation of effective teaching that may then inform future studies and dialogue. Spencer and

Schmelkin (2002) conclude that adult students are generally willing to provide anonymous formal evaluation and feedback, and have no particular fear of repercussions. However they have little confidence that the faculty or administrators pay attention to the results and do not even consider the formal ratings themselves. I believe that this attitude must change in order to facilitate an open exchange about improving teaching and learning.

Educators and administrators should be aware that adult students are motivated to unearth their stories about classroom experiences on an online faculty rating system as they have had limited opportunity to openly and formally discuss their concerns within the power structure of the educational institution. As a result, peers are influenced in their course selections which could then impact enrollments, teaching loads, and student expectations.

One objective of the interpretive analysis in this study was to reveal the alignment between online informal student comments and the empirical research of teaching effectiveness to promote a greater acceptance of informal evaluation as a credible and beneficial commentary to affect change. I have noticed a strong alignment between student evaluative postings from an online informal faculty rating system (accessing Ratemyprofessors.ca) and comparing my findings with those of institutional formal faculty rating systems (accessing the empirical research on teaching effectiveness).

Having realised this alignment, one might ask why not simply continue to use the formal systems to receive student evaluation of teaching effectiveness? There is more than one answer to this question and in Chapter Four I explore the data more fully to make this case.

The findings of this study are significant as they show that informal evaluative comments provide credible data to college teachers for the purpose of improving instruction. The nature of the on-line student comments illustrate the benefits of uncensored evaluative data from a source created by students and for students who engage in dialogue with their peers without fear of repercussion or the misuse of power. The impact of both effective and ineffective teaching is described explicitly on-line, be it good, bad or indifferent; and students avoid the potential bias experienced with sanitized institutional teaching evaluation forms.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study conducts qualitative interpretive content analysis of students' anecdotal insights, provided on the RMP public domain website. The analysis will examine the relationship of informal online student rating of effective teaching characteristics with what empirical research defines as effective teaching. The key factor is that students are reporting their realities in their own words, which are phenomenological (based on individual truth and reality), authentic and fundamental to this research.

Delimitations

The goal of this study was not to formalize an informal rating system, but instead to capture and theme what students are reporting about effective teaching characteristics, regardless of their intent or attitude in each posting. Data was analyzed for the content (not for the structure) of teaching characteristics that were present or absent, provided by

a random sample of students, in three mid-sized Community Colleges located in British Columbia.

This study focused on the text of individual postings, which were interpretively themed. The study did not investigate the credibility of the medium used to collect the comments (i.e., RMP), nor was it designed to unearth bias or a halo effect, measure the validity of student ratings in relation to student learning, nor measure course difficulty in relation to student learning.

Limitations

In a world of academic litigiousness, qualitative research of teaching effectiveness that is based on students' anecdotal perceptions from an informal on-line source, may be considered unreliable and thus be rejected by faculty and administrators.

The analysis of attributions and the interpretive content analysis of this study were based on college students' opinions, perceptions, and descriptions of their classroom experience. Their phenomenological views may be either informed and accurate or uninformed and inaccurate and could lose relevance over time.

Although the primary focus of this study is on the students' perceptions of effective teaching characteristics, it is important to note that there are also social factors that affect teaching and learning in the classroom setting. Nesbit (2000) contends "social structures do not directly cause classroom interactions but act more as influences through mediating variables, even to the level of the minutiae of teaching situations and activities" (p. 2). The literature reviewed within this study is limited to educational psychology and does not examine the socio-cultural dimensions of teaching. The focus is

to hear the students' anecdotal comments that relate directly to their evaluation of effective teaching characteristics, regardless of what other social influences may be in play. The discussion of socio-cultural dimensions is beyond the scope of this study and would be interesting to examine in future research.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the study and introduced the research question: What can we learn from students' anecdotal perceptions of effective teaching characteristics, posted on an informal online faculty rating system?

I have declared the purpose and objectives of the study and provided a synthesis of the themes of the literature review. To better describe the process of the study I have also provided a brief overview of the research design and procedures. Finally, I have introduced the significance of the research and noted the associated delimitations and limitations. With this preview and the context of the study now presented, I turn to a more in-depth discussion of the literature review themes.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter investigates three emergent themes related to this study's theoretical framework of teaching effectiveness through a review of academic literature. The three themes are teaching effectiveness in post-secondary education, power relations in higher education, and less traditional but comparable means of communication. Each theme provides background and context for the research question: What can we learn from students' anecdotal perceptions of effective teaching characteristics, posted on an informal online faculty rating system?

To discover what is currently considered to be effective teaching in post-secondary education, the literature review first encompasses dimensions of teaching effectiveness; authenticity and credibility in teaching practice; and teaching practices that promote self-regulated learning for adults. Perspectives on teaching effectiveness are also examined as a means of articulating the views of researchers, teachers, and college students. Also, student perceptions of effective teaching characteristics are discussed.

To illuminate power in the classroom as a source of interference for students' evaluation of effective teaching, power relations in higher education are also reviewed. Here, Foucault's (1977) analysis of power and the use of power in organisations from a leadership perspective are examined and linked to higher education.

Finally, two less traditional but comparable means of informal communication selected for this study are explored. Firstly, the metaphor of water-cooler talk is linked to informal communication in the post-secondary setting. Secondly, the social presence of computer mediated communication is discussed in relation to online student evaluation of effective teaching characteristics.

Teaching Effectiveness in Post-secondary Education

Experienced adult learners can differentiate between effective and ineffective teaching practice and effectiveness is irrevocably contextual (Pratt, 1988). Additionally, what might be considered effective teaching for one group of adult learners is quite ineffective for another group (Cervero, 1989). Educators would be wise to ask, effective for what and effective for whom? (Brookfield, 1990). Clearly, the classroom experience is open to judgments and polarized interpretations of teaching effectiveness that may in turn leave students either motivated or demoralized. The teacher might be mistakenly convinced that because some students are successful, others are just not willing to put in the effort. So talking about teaching effectiveness as if it were an objective concept whose features can be easily agreed on by all reasonable people is unrealistic. The challenge lies in accepting and understanding multiple perspectives of teaching effectiveness to bring balance to classroom interactions.

Selected research of teaching effectiveness that relates to the academic well-being and interests of students in post-secondary settings is examined within five sub-topics: (a) dimensions of effective teaching, (b) authenticity and credibility in teaching practice, (c) teaching practices that promote self-regulated learning for adults, (d) perspectives on teaching effectiveness, and (e) students' perceptions of the characteristics of effective college teachers.

Dimensions of Effective Teaching in Adult Education Settings

Patrick and Smart's (1988) collation of the dimensions of effective teaching, based on several substantive reviews of student rating research, is shown in Table 2.1;

their findings provide three relatively common and critical factors for effective teaching: respect for students; ability to challenge students; and organization and presentation skills.

Table 2.1 Collation of Dimensions of Effective Teaching (Patrick & Smart, 1998).

<p>Brown and Atkins, 1993</p> <p>Three factors of effective teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • caring • systematic • stimulating 	<p>Ramsden, 1991</p> <p>Effective teaching characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provides understandable explanations • provides good feedback • encourages independent thought • being organized • stimulates students' interest • empathetic to students' needs • sets clear goals
<p>Entwistle and Tait, 1990</p> <p>Two factors of effective teaching</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teaching ability • openness to students 	<p>Ramsden, 1992</p> <p>Key principles of effective teaching in higher education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an interest in explaining things clearly • appropriate assessment and feedback • encouraging independence, control and active engagement • a willingness to set clear goals and intellectual challenge • concern and respect for students and student learning • a willingness to learn from students
<p>Lowman, 1984</p> <p>Two factors of effective teaching</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clarity of presentation • quality of interpersonal relations 	<p>Samuelowicz and Bain, 1992</p> <p>Lecturers conceptions of teaching at tertiary level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • conveying knowledge • facilitating student's independent learning
<p>Lowman and Mathie, 1993</p> <p>Two factors of effective teaching</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intellectual excitement • interpersonal rapport 	<p>Swartz, White and Stuck, 1990</p> <p>Two factors of effective teaching</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clear instructional presentation • management of student behaviour

In addition to Patrick and Smart's (1998) collated factor analysis, D'Apollonia, Abrami, and Rosenfield (1993) applied multivariate approaches to meta-analysis to uncover common factor structure across student rating forms. They coded 458 items in 17 student rating forms into common instructional categories, extracted a reliable set of inter-category correlation coefficients from the reproduced correlation matrices, aggregated them to produce an aggregate correlation matrix, and subsequently factor analyzed that correlation matrix. They reported a large common principle component across student rating forms that explained about 63% of the variance in instructional effectiveness. Four first-order factors were obtained. However, D'Apollonia, Abrami, and Rosenfield (1993) also concluded that an equally viable interpretation of the factor studies of student rating forms measured a global component, General Instructional Skill, with three sub-skills: delivering instruction, facilitating interactions, and evaluating student learning. Their conclusions are similar to the findings of the earlier factor studies viewed in Table 2-1.

Feldman's (1988) review of earlier student rating research indicates that "the teacher's preparation and organization, clarity and ability to be understood, and sensitivity to, and concern with class level and progress are highly important" (p. 316).

It is apparent from these seminal studies that college students are seeking teachers who show respect, care about effective practice and care about their students. The absence of these characteristics may negatively impact retention of course content through unwarranted distraction. The relevancy and value of a course are considered highly important predictors of teaching effectiveness, and if teachers are hoping to keep their students engaged in their learning, then it is important to sustain a balance between

classroom management and student expression of need. Multidimensionality is important not only because of its obvious diagnostic quality as instructor feedback but also because it provides a more sophisticated and realistic assessment of the various aspects of teaching (Marsh & Roche, 1997).

College students invest in education.

College students invest their limited educational dollars to experience effective teaching. McKeachie (1997) elaborates on teacher-student relations by explaining that in order for post-secondary students to believe they are receiving good educational value for their educational dollar, they need to be led by faculty who care. Inevitably, teachers need to take meaningful action to genuinely understand their teaching practice and to assist students with the advancement of their learning.

I agree that students often express the importance of feeling respected, supported and encouraged by a sensitive teacher in their learning process. The conditions produced by the teacher may determine whether learning outcomes are retained or abandoned. Teachers who are multidimensional exhibit respect and openness while also promoting individual and group learning processes within supportive adult learning environments. Mutual, reciprocal and collaborative learning environments that are supportive encourage knowledge, retention, and sustainability (Edmonds, Lowe, Murray & Seymour, 2002).

In order to move forward, teachers need to examine what it is they want to accomplish and why (Kaufman, Guerra & Platt, 2005). Furthermore, teachers must seek meaningful dialogue with the students and other stakeholders to promote realistic self-evaluation and to examine their dimensions of effective teaching practice.

Interactive process between college students and the teacher.

Effective teaching is not just a matter of finding a method that works well and using it consistently; rather teaching is an interactive process between adult students and the teacher. Good teaching involves building bridges between what is in your head and what is in the students' heads (McKeachie, 1997). Young & Shaw (1999) profiled effective college and university teachers and concluded that students believe the relevancy and value of a course are highly important predictors of teacher effectiveness; this finding may provide teachers with valuable insight into understanding the dimensions of effective teaching.

Teachers who ignore students' needs may run the risk of negating learner potential which in turn will create barriers to learning. For example, Forsyth and McMillan (1991) assert that an adult student's desire to learn (i.e., intrinsic motivation) should be encouraged and not stifled:

Educators too frequently assume that students are reluctant learners, when in many cases they become reluctant only after their initial intrinsic motivation is wiped away by hours of uninspired lectures in which instructors convey their own contempt for the subject matter. (p. 54)

It is no surprise that adult students in this type of learning environment would express great frustration. Regardless, according to Dirkx (2001), educators within formal adult education settings seek to control, manage, limit, or redirect outward expressions of emotions and feelings. Dirkx (2001) researched the importance of

attending to emotions and feelings in contexts, interactions, and relationships that characterize adult learning and by a meta-analysis, concluded that multidimensional learning is facilitated in environments where learners feel safe [to express need].

If teachers are hoping to keep their students engaged in their learning, then it is important to sustain a balance between classroom management and student expression of need. However, this responsibility does not rest solely with the teacher in all circumstances; college students must also be accountable in their learning experience. Taking risks and accepting challenges are keys to success not only in the post-secondary settings, but also in the context of citizenship. Adult learners must accept responsibility to learn and apply critical thought, and not simply rely on being taught or spoon-fed as they may have been when children.

Adult accountability.

Hiemstra (1992) argues that there are many adult students who prefer to be accountable in identifying their own learning needs providing the teacher is open to their comments - “adult learners are capable of taking personal responsibility for their own learning and assuming an increasingly larger role in the instructional process” (p. 327). Access to quality dimensions of teaching practice with teachers who care and understand the principles of effective teaching is more likely to produce satisfied, self-regulated learners and positive outcomes. Tiberius and Billson (1991) assert that the social context of teaching and learning must be considered knowing that “teacher-student relationships can have positive effects on student development, including academic achievement,

intellectual development, persistence in higher education, personality development, and educational aspirations” (p. 69). Jarvis (1992) contends that educators need to generate awareness and foster motivation with use of dialogue to “learn and grow together with their students” (p. 114).

Authenticity and Credibility in Teaching Practice

Authenticity.

“Authenticity is the expression of the genuine self in the community wherein teachers in higher education come to know themselves and their preferences within the social context of their work” (Cranton, 2004, p. 7). Students are more likely to be attracted to authentic teachers who are viewed as their trustworthy partners in learning.

Also, Brookfield (1990) describes authenticity in relation to student needs:

Evidence of authenticity includes the following behaviours: (1) teachers’ words and actions are congruent; (2) teachers admit to error, acknowledge fallibility, and make mistakes in full view of learners; (3) teachers allow aspects of their personhood outside their role as teachers to be revealed to students; and (4) teachers respect learners by listening carefully to students’ expressions of concern, by taking care to create opportunities for students’ voices to be heard, and by being open to changing their practice as a result of students’ suggestions. (pp. 163-164)

Given that research into effective teaching has generally ignored the personal qualities of teachers, perhaps the whole domain of effective teaching could be enhanced

by including the innate qualities of the teachers, and thus contribute an improved understanding of the effectiveness of teachers (Patrick & Smart, 1998).

Understanding the importance of teacher qualities in relation to learning, Cranton and Carusetta (2004) provide critical insights into which attributes of teachers students rate as important. Following their three years of research involving twenty-two educators from multiple disciplines, Cranton and Carusetta (2004) conclude that standard faculty resources on teaching effectiveness are limited to principles, guidelines, strategies and best practices without accounting for teachers' personalities, preferences, values, and ways of being in the world- -the ways in which they are authentic. Their data revealed five dimensions of authenticity including: self- awareness; awareness of others; relationships with the learner; awareness of context; and a critically reflective approach to practice.

Credibility.

Brookfield (1990) describes credibility as the “teachers’ ability to present themselves as people with something to offer students. When teachers provide this credibility, students see them as possessing a breadth of knowledge, depth of insight, and length of experience that far exceeds the students’ own” (p.163).

It is important for adult learners to believe that the teacher’s experience and depth and breadth of knowledge exceed their own level of competence. Although teaching process skills are also important, without credibility, process skill holds little value.

Students are able to sense the presence of authenticity and credibility. When these elements are absent from the classroom experience, students may exhibit a

disturbing level of mistrust. It is apparent that teachers must make the effort to act authentically and build credibility or potentially do more harm than good (Brookfield, 1990).

Teaching Practices that Promote Self-regulated Learning for Adults

As discussed in Chapter One, teaching practices that promote self-regulated learning is an important sub-theme of this study because it acknowledges the importance of the teacher-student relationship within college settings.

Traditional versus self-regulated design.

Darling-Hammond (1993) challenged traditional learning environments when she stated, “traditional experimental designs rely on fidelity to treatment, but more and more, ‘good’ teaching is being characterized as flexible and responsive to different students and classrooms” (p. 753). Traditional learning environments are perhaps counter-productive to effective teaching practices that might otherwise be experienced in self-regulated learning environments.

Advocates of self-regulated learning claim that traditional teaching instruction is in need of reform (Boekaerts, 1996; Witteman, 1997). Introducing self-regulated instructional formats and teaching methods to the traditional classroom requires a focus on all aspects of learning including: teaching behaviour, student motivation and learning strategies (van Grinsven & Tillema, 2006).

Furthermore, advocates of self-regulated learning share the common view that effective college education should go beyond learning content-specific information and

also provide opportunities for students to graduate with knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, capable of setting and pursuing goals, able to monitor their personal progress and learn from experience (van Grinsven & Tillema, 2006). These meta-cognitive skills represent the humanistic type of learning that is liberating, self-empowering, and to the benefit of all students.

The humanistic approach to learning supports the concept that people do have a natural potential for learning and can choose their own directions, discover personal learning resources, seek solutions for their problems, decide on the best course of action and manage the consequences, all of which exist in the cycle of self-regulated learning. Additionally, Mackeracher (1996) states “humanists tend to view learning as an inside-out process controlled and directed by the learner, rather than an outside-in process controlled and directed by the facilitator” (p. 229). This teaching and learning dynamic varies from classroom to classroom spawning debate on teaching effectiveness. Considering the vast amount of content in college courses, students must be self-directed and come to class prepared for the lecture content. The teacher is the facilitator of learning in these settings and needs to be more the guide by the side and less the sage on the stage.

Defining teaching effectiveness in self-regulated learning.

Zimmerman (2003) advises “the teachers’ goal [in the self-regulated environment] is to work themselves out of the job of managing their students’ learning and . . . learning is not something that can be done for students, rather it is something that is done by them” (pp.18-22). Certainly, research shows that students’ perceptions of the

learning environment, their experiences of autonomy and the supportive behaviour of teachers have direct influence on active student involvement in learning (van Grinsven & Tillema, 2006).

Student autonomy is an important condition for active self-regulated learning (Boekaerts, 1999). Learning environments that do not allow students to make decisions have negative impacts on motivation (Slavin et al., 1985). Opportunities for autonomy direct students' learning processes and promote their interest in learning and mastery of skills and therefore imply an allocation of responsibility (Deci, et al., 1981; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986).

Similar to what has been described earlier as a dimension of effective teaching in traditional settings, the teacher's behaviour is also an important feature of a self-regulated learning environment (Levy, et al., 1992). This is evidenced by teachers who are perceived as being activators and clear communicators and therefore have a stronger group of motivated students (Bergen, et al., 1994). Also, student perceptions of teaching behaviours are strongly related to appreciation of learning tasks (Wigfield, et al., 1998; Wenzel, 1998). Finally, teacher communication styles strongly influence student outcomes and satisfaction with instruction (Brekelmans, et al., 1989).

Effective self-regulated adult learning environments.

The literature describes features of effective learning environments that include the following five classroom variables:

1. Interaction between teacher and learner: Students initiate self-regulated learning activities only when teachers are less directive (De Grave, et al., 1999).

2. Grading and Assessment: Self-evaluations, especially self-assessment of performances, could help to develop self-regulated learning strategies (Zimmerman, 2000).
3. Types of Task: When learning tasks are interesting and challenging, they lead to higher task recognition and therefore to increased use of strategies (Choi & Hannafin, 1995). Students engaged in self-selected tasks were more likely to use strategies voluntarily, persist when work became difficult, and maintain their focus on academic work (Turner, 1995).
4. Degree of Autonomy: The teacher becomes an activator instead of regulator of learning (Boekaerts, 1999), and students gain insight into their level of competence by regular reflection on their use of strategies by the teacher as their coach or mentor (Van Velzen, 2003).
5. Attention for learning: Learning to learn in classrooms is important for the attainment of high levels of involvement in a continuous learning process (Areglado, et al., 1996).

Research indicates that the differential effects of learning environment variables on student self-regulated learning have important consequences for instructional design and those teachers who are ‘coaches of students’ are perceived to facilitate the supportive learning process (van Grinsven & Tillema, 2006). Autonomy-stimulating learning environments invite student activity and enhance self-regulated learning strategies: cognitive, affective and regulatory (Boekaerts & Minnaert, 1999). Students who experience greater autonomy also have a positive perception of teacher behaviour (van Grinsven, 2003).

Research also shows that instructional formats that foster self-regulated learning affect the value that students allot to tasks. The way in which students perceive these tasks can affect the effort put into the tasks. Also, students feel most supported by a teacher in instructional formats that focus explicitly on the process of learning to learn (van Grinsven & Tillema, 2006).

Self-regulated learning stems from models of self-regulation that apply to both teachers and students. It follows, therefore, that the eventual level of expertise in self-regulated learning reached by any particular student depends on how their own teachers elect to launch them toward these kinds of experiences (Randi & Corno, 2000).

In self-regulated learning environments the teaching is adaptive at the micro level; teachers are adapting instruction to the students, and students themselves are adapting to the instruction (Corno & Snow, 1986). Once teachers become more aware of effective strategies that promote self-regulated learning they can incorporate the strategies into their lesson plans and curriculum and make connections in their classroom teaching environment. Principles, strategies, and modes of behaviour regarding self-regulated learning can then be brought front and center in students' thinking as they work (Randi & Corno, 2000).

This brief summary makes the strong connection between classroom environments and student perceptions of effective teaching characteristics. In other words, it is apparent that teaching effectiveness in self-regulated learning environments is influenced strongly by the teacher-student relationship.

Teaching effectiveness in self-regulated learning environments relies on self-knowledge, task knowledge, and strategy knowledge:

If the instructional goal is to help students learn course material in a meaningful way and move it along the memory continuum, then instructors' knowledge must have several components. *Self-knowledge* must include instructor's knowledge of themselves as instructors, as well as their knowledge of their students as learners. *Task knowledge* must include knowledge of the academic tasks appropriate for reaching desired instructional outcomes, as well as knowledge of how this interacts with students' task knowledge. *Strategy knowledge* must include not only instructional strategies for teaching content but also strategies for teaching students how to learn content. (Weinstein & Meyer, 1991, p.21)

Perspectives on Teaching Effectiveness

Researcher perspective.

Research on the validity, bias and utility of formal student evaluations of teaching effectiveness is extensive and foundational to this study. Ramsden (1991) concludes that student perspective is an essential source of information for the evaluation of effective teaching. Harrison (1996) contends that in an experimental context, students possess a moderate degree of self-insight into the decision processes they use when making overall evaluation of teaching effectiveness. Marsh and Roche (1997) encourage researchers to consider whether proper account has been taken of the distinct components of students' ratings that reflect the multidimensionality of effective teaching. D'Appollonia and Abrami (1997) conclude that student motivation, course level, instructor's grading

leniency, and instructor's expressivity may bias student ratings of instructors. These factors will be useful as I analyze and theme the individual anecdotal online comments.

Finally, Harrison's (1996) study on college students' self-insight adds credibility to their ability to evaluate their teachers in a meaningful way:

Students' self-insight about how they evaluate teaching effectiveness was studied with 176 undergraduate and 53 graduate students through a policy-capturing approach. Results show self-insight and a reasonably high level of consensus in making overall evaluations, supporting the validity of student ratings of teaching effectiveness. (p. i)

Teacher perspective.

A study of teacher perspective is essential because research shows how it could impact the quality of student learning. "If teaching approaches are strongly influenced by the underlying beliefs of the teacher, quality assurance measures should take into account conceptions [perspectives] rather than concentrate exclusively upon approaches (Kember, 1997, p. 273). From his review of 13 studies conducted between 1983 and 1996, Kember (1997) discovered only five different teaching perspectives at the post-secondary level.

After ten years of research in five countries, studying hundreds adult educators across a wide range of disciplines, contexts and cultures, and including findings of other researchers, Pratt (2000) determined that "there is no single view of learning or teaching dominating what might be called good teaching" (p. 5). Pratt (2000) also highlights the importance of common held beliefs and value systems that justify teachers' actions. He

documents five perspectives on teaching, each with potential: transmission, developmental, apprenticeship, nurturing, and social reform (Pratt, et al., 1998).

From this study came the development and implementation of five common perspectives with an instrument called the *Teaching Perspectives Inventory* (TPI) (Pratt & Collins, 2000). The TPI is valuable to the teacher as it helps to build self-awareness and a quality connection to students with the added benefit of highlighting teaching approaches that may require further development. This concept also describes the essence of this study on how we can improve teaching and learning through response to student feedback.

Chickering and Gamson's (1987) *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* was developed from a review of "fifty years of research on the way teachers teach and students learn" (p. 1). Substantive research from the review indicates that effective teaching perspectives include: encouraging student-faculty contact, developing reciprocity and cooperation among students, using active learning techniques, giving prompt feedback, emphasizing time on task, communicating high expectations, and respecting diverse talents and ways of learning. These are fundamental to good teaching and learning practice and it is also expected that various applications of these perspectives will occur across disciplines, teaching methods, learning styles, institutions, and methods of implementation (Sorcinelli, 1991).

The 1989 and 1990 conferences of principle higher education researchers and colleagues synthesized Chickering and Gamson's (1987) Seven Principles research findings into two important measures of teacher effectiveness: (1) to identify practices

that would result in powerful undergraduate education, and (2) to provide a set of research-based principles to stimulate reform in undergraduate education (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996).

Student perspective.

This study raises the proposition of using student *informal* evaluation processes to improve classroom practices. In order to understand the potential of this concept, it is essential to first understand current student perspectives on teaching and the level of effectiveness in its *formal* evaluation. If formal evaluation is not taken seriously by all three stakeholders, students, administrators, and teachers, then how can it be of value in providing the impetus for effective change in classroom practices? If informal evaluative processes occur regularly (and perhaps because of their flexibility yield less restricted results than those of formal processes), then it seems logical to tap into and utilize the informal ratings to improve the classroom experience.

Spencer and Schmelkin (2002) conclude that formal student evaluation of teachers “enables students to reach out to their peers and formalize that blend of information and opinion that circulates in the *informal student grapevine*” (p. 398). Their comments emphasize the ever-present informal peer network that rates classroom experience and effective teaching.

The same research also shows that students are generally willing to do formal evaluations and provide feedback, and have no particular fear of repercussions. However, they have little confidence that the faculty or administrators pay attention to the results and do not even consult the ratings themselves (Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002).

Other survey studies on student evaluation of teaching effectiveness show that students believe the formal evaluations are important and that students are qualified to rate their professors, but they are not too optimistic about the overall weight put by administrators and faculty on student opinion (Braxton, Bayer, & Noseworthy, 2002).

Both of the above studies draw attention to the use of student evaluation of teaching effectiveness for administrative purposes with far less emphasis on improving teaching and learning based on the students' identified needs and perceptions. From this it is not surprising that students have little confidence in the formal evaluation system and revert to less traditional means, such as RMP, to evaluate their teachers.

Students' Perceptions of Characteristics of Effective College Teachers

In this section I draw attention to existing studies that, in combination, examine student perceptions of effective teaching characteristics derived from institutional teaching evaluation forms and the examination of on-line rating systems. These validity studies are foundational and significant to this dissertation as they provide the empirical data necessary to identify student discernment of effective teaching characteristics informally reported through RMP.

Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, Collins, Filer, Wiedmaier and Moore (2007), used a comprehensive mixed methods analysis and validity study of a teaching evaluation form (TEF) to develop the *CARE-RESPECTED Model of Teaching Evaluation*. This model represents characteristics that students considered to reflect effective college teaching - comprising four meta-themes (communicator, advocate, responsible, empowering) and nine themes (responsive, enthusiast, student centered, professional, expert, connector, transmitter, ethical and director). Onwuegbuzie, et al. (2007) discovered three of the

most prevalent themes of their study were not represented by any of the TEF items: (1) transmitter, (2) responsive, and (3) connector. Subsequently, they recommend that future research should examine other factors that might predict these three variables. Their study raises the question of the continued use of teaching evaluation forms that omit what students deem to be the most important characteristics of effective college teachers.

Otto, Sanford, and Ross (2008) conducted a validity study that investigated the pattern of relationships of online ratings and analysis that suggests online ratings in their current form may be useful, even though possible abuses could limit validity in specific instances. Their work acknowledges the increase in the use and popularity of online ratings that may be subject to possible bias, but also recognize that students may be providing their peers with accurate and dependable information. Otto, et al. (2008) determined that professor selection is sometimes based on RMP ratings and questioned “should we [faculty] ignore RMP ratings and even discourage students from relying on them, or if we should admit that the ratings may contain some useful information?” (p. 4). Their study concluded that, to the extent that online ratings can be valid measures to teaching effectiveness, online ratings have potential value. Increased understanding of the ratings could assist students in matching their learning styles with compatible professors and instructors should improve their teaching methods to improve their ratings (Otto, et al., 2008).

Pan, Tan, Ragupathi, Booluck, Roop, and Ip (2008) devised a method for quantifying students’ comments from evaluation forms to increase their usefulness in complementing and confirming ratings. The findings indicate that students value teaching quality more than teacher characteristics, suggesting their ability to make valid

judgments about teaching effectiveness. Their study concluded that formal student feedback is an important teaching evaluation tool relied upon in most institutions selected for their study. They also concluded that using quantified student ratings alone to discriminate between faculty members for teaching assessment would be an incomplete process. Pan, et al. (2008) contend that student ratings should be “augmented by qualitative interpretation of student written feedback; it is only then that we can give meaning to the numerical nature of student ratings” (p. 98); their well-founded recommendation motivated the development of my study that focuses on written evaluative student commentary.

Power Relations in Higher Education

I believe that students’ informally voiced evaluative comments reflect a desire for effective teaching yet I question if their opinions will ever be endorsed as legitimate commentary in the realm of disciplinary power present in higher education. Nuhfer (2004) contends that this is in part is due to “inherent emotional volatility that has led to polarized positions about the value of formal student evaluations in post-secondary settings” (p. 1).

Foucault’s Analysis of Power

As I researched the topic of power in higher education and, amongst other academic literature read Foucault’s analysis of power and its regulation of individual behaviour (1977), I learned how seventeenth century reformation insidiously developed sophisticated methods of repression and behaviour transformation that epitomizes

control and repression in society today. I noticed the disturbing connection between Foucault's description of power relations of the seventeenth century and certain elements of today's educational practices that oppress student voice and inhibit a democratic process; which in part is the essence of this study.

Sovereign versus disciplinary power and technologies of power.

Foucault distinguishes between sovereign power that is exercised from above by a discernable authority, and its replacement, disciplinary power - - power that is exercised by people on others and on themselves in the course of their daily lives (Foucault, 1977). Viewing the historical transformation of power, Foucault contrasts the feudal penal system, where only the king could exert sovereign power in an immediate and forceful manner on the body of the condemned, with disciplinary power that does not need to destroy the body to assert power. Rather than being immediate, direct and targeting only a few by order of the sovereign, disciplinary power is disseminated in a myriad of different channels (technologies of power) and applied through an invisible gaze, which targets and controls the many (Staiger, 2005). These technologies of power and disciplinary practices produce effective surveillance and efficient institutional machinery (Foucault, 1977). Wallhausen, a seventeenth century author, provides his summary of disciplinary power that would also describe certain higher education practices today:

. . . [Disciplinary power] trains the moving, confused, useless multitudes of bodies and forces into a multiplicity of individual elements - - small, separate cells, organic autonomies, generic identities and continuities, combinatory segments. Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific

technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise. The success of disciplinary power derives no doubt from the use of simple instruments; hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and their combination is a procedure that is specific to it, the examination. (cited in Foucault, 1977, p. 170)

These invisible technologies of power are effective because they permeate life, naturalize power, and are difficult to resist because the locus of power is indiscernible.

To Foucault (1980) “power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (p. 39). Thus, “power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain” (p. 98). Foucault also writes that “power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power . . . individuals are the vehicles of power” (p. 98).

An example of Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power is explained in Ropers-Huilman’s, et al. (2003) study of student activists’ perceptions of culture and change “decisions in higher education institutions tend to be made through hierarchical structures that privilege administrators and, in a different way, faculty members” (p. 5). The same 2003 study reports a student activist’s comment:

There are levels of power in the political culture [of educational institutions] and administrators have a certain kind of power, but students have a different kind of power . . . you just have to know how to use both

. . . students can work without the system to pressure for change, and if everybody is pressuring for change then the system has to follow. (p. 13)

Foucault believes that power relations are manifest in all adult educational interactions, even those that seem the freest and most unconstrained (Brookfield, 2001).

Productive power.

Disciplinary power is not wholly repressive or constraining; it is also productive. In human relations, repression and liberation co-exist to different degrees wherever power is present. Foucault (1980) states that power does not just prevent things happening, it also:

Produces effects at the level of desire. If power were anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that . . . it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, and produces discourse. (p. 119)

Foucault (1977) also insists that:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it excludes, it represses, it censors, it abstracts, it masks, it conceals. In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (p. 194)

Foucault's later work (1984) states that as society became more complex, regulation of individual behaviour became increasingly reliant upon more subtle methods

of control, for example, incitement, persuasion and recruitment rather than force or coercion. Regardless of this shift, productive power continued to operate by ensuring individuals acted as subjects within the dominant disciplines; it simply utilised different tactics and methods.

Foucault (1977) explains that disciplines (or general formulas of domination) occurred as early as the birth of the human body when the:

Machinery of power explores it, breaks it down and re-arranges it [determining] how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies. (p. 138)

This subjection continued throughout the eighteenth century when a meticulous observation of detail and political awareness emerged for the continued use and control of people in the areas of medicine, education, the workplace, and the military, through the 'art of distributions' (techniques, methods, knowledge), that distributed individuals in space, enclosure, functional site, and by rank. In Foucault's (1977) words, "discipline increases the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)" (p. 138).

Similar stratification exists in today's educational system. For example, Ranson, (2000) refers to government's public policy that:

Focuses on the skills young people will need to enter and survive in the labour market; less emphasis is accorded to the significance of

encouraging them to find voice and practices of cooperative agency
 indispensable to flourishing within a democratic civil society. (p. 263)

Another connection to the past is described in the work of Shultz and Cook-Sather (2001) who speak of the contradictions and inconsistencies in government's presentation of student participation and voice "on the one hand the virtues of consultation and participation are endorsed while on the other hand, systems are sustained which reflect very different values of 'competitive individualism' - - - where students are categorized, compared to and judged against one another" (pp. 3-4).

Multiplicities of power and power relations.

Foucault's (1994) commentary describes the multiplicities of power including: (1) capacitive power (goal-directed, physical, and instrumental); (2) power relations (between individuals and groups); and (3) communicative power (symbolic, written and spoken) - - " . . . [these] always overlap one another, support one another reciprocally and use each other mutually as means to an end" (p. 135).

Of the three multiplicities of power, Foucault (1994) stresses that it is necessary to distinguish the second of the multiplicities, 'power relations', as having a specific nature including two indispensable elements: (1) an active other, or subject, who is free to act - - not that this implies consent- - because it is only in the subject's actions that one can observe one's power over the subject; and (2) the open field of possibilities or range of ways in which the subject can act (including resistance). In Foucault's words (1994), "the exercise of power is a 'conduct of conducts' and a management of possibilities" (p. 138).

Rudduck's (2006) comments on teacher resistance to student participation in educational decisions directly relates to Foucault's concept of power relations "... the [teacher's] fundamental concern is about rupturing the security of traditional power relations between teachers and students and redefining the boundaries of possibility" (p. 225). In contrast, Smyth and Hattam (2002) support student voice in their observation that "... [voice] starts from the position that interesting things can be said by groups who do not occupy the high ground ... they may actually be quite lowly and situated at some distance from the centres of power" (p. 378).

Students' means of resistance to ineffective teaching presents an interesting *reversal* of Bentham's panopticon used by Foucault (1977) in his analysis of power relations. Briefly, the concept of the panopticon is defined as the capability of universal surveillance of the many by the visible few, without those being viewed knowing when the 'gaze' occurs. To what extent does informal student evaluation of teachers become a reverse panopticon? The power relations experienced in the classroom, by numbers alone, does not permit the few (i.e., teachers) to watch the many (i.e., students) so one could argue that students actually hold the power of observation and exercise their resistance to ineffective teaching in a passive-aggressive manner. Teachers never really know when they are under surveillance, yet they are certainly under the students' gaze. In sum, using the words of Staiger (2005):

The individual [student] is not constantly watched, but constantly watching representations of a collective, authority-demanding identity [teacher]. The concept of the panopticon is thus reverse: the individual is

not under an invisible ever-present gaze, but inescapably positioned as gazing at representations of the collective's identity. (p. 568)

Power relations and interference with student evaluation of effective teaching.

Foucault (1994) uses the example of an educational institution to describe the interrelationships (or blocks) in which capacitive power, power relations, and the resources of communication constitute regulated systems. In Foucault's words (1994) consider the educational institution and:

Disposal of its space, the meticulous regulations that govern its internal life; the different activities that are organized there, the diverse persons who live there, or meet one another, each with his own function, his well-defined character – all these things constitute a block of capacity communication - - power. Activity to ensure learning and the acquisition of aptitudes or types of behaviour works via a whole ensemble of regulated communications (lessons, questions and answers, order, exhortations, coded signs of obedience, differential marks of “value” of each person and of the levels of knowledge) and by means of a whole series of power processes (enclosure, surveillance, reward and punishment, the pyramidal hierarchy). (p. 136)

Such ‘interrelationships of power’ within regulated systems is exemplified by the denial of student voice by teachers and administrators in matters of education, considered the norm within post-secondary education, as substantiated by Shor (1996) in his critique of a typical policy paper on the professional duties of teachers:

Faculty alone are given control of knowledge-making. . .students shall have an opportunity to evaluate their courses, perhaps at the end, perhaps at mid-term, even if they do not have the authority to negotiate it. Such unilateral authority is standard practice, a friendly fit with the lack of democracy and the dominance of hierarchy in all social institutions.

(p. 32)

In the absence of democratic negotiation with students on educational matters and when formal student evaluation of teachers is often neglected and ignored by educational institutions, power relations lead to student resistance. Foucault (1977) reminds us that “there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations are exercised”

(p. 142).

Students are likely to back away from conflict and not formally report inappropriate teaching attitudes and behaviours based on the power that teachers hold over students while in the classroom (Braxton, Bayer, & Noseworthy, 2002). However, this student-held fear of repercussion from the teacher does not hold true outside of the classroom. As a means of resistance in the teacher-student power relationship, students contribute to an anonymous online faculty rating system to express their opinions about the level of teaching effectiveness they experience. To support this concept, Brookfield (2001) asserts that Foucault’s analysis of power has direct implications for common practices found in institutionally sponsored, formal programs of adult education.

Leadership Perspective: Use of power in organisations.

Literature from the field of leadership provides several excellent examples of the effective use of power in organisations that parallels power exerted in the post-secondary classroom. Kouzes and Posner (2002) describe the counter-productivity of leaders' misuse of power in organisations, which can be easily compared to the classroom power struggle:

Traditional thinking promotes the archaic idea that power is a fixed sum: if I have more, then you have less. Naturally, people with this view hold tightly to the power that they perceive is theirs and are extremely reluctant to share it with anyone. This notion is wrong-headed and clearly inconsistent with all the evidence on high-performing organisations. (pp. 285-286)

Drawing from this rationale and to best engage people in organisations (i.e., students), it would follow that the leader (i.e., the teacher) needs to appropriately manage the environment, while also (1) facilitating an open and respectful interaction with adults (learners), and (2) by empowering versus over-powering.

Taken a step further, Kouzes and Posner (2002) describe the outcomes of an effective organisational power-relationship that would be equally appealing in the classroom:

Listen to how people feel when working with the leaders they most admire: alive, valued, turned-on, enthusiastic, respected, significant, capable and proud. What do leaders do to make us feel

this way? They respect and listen to us, they support and encourage us, they follow through on their commitments to us, they coach and mentor us, and they make us believe that we can make a difference. Leaders heed the voice within each of us that cries out for acknowledgment that we are neither invisible nor inconsequential . . . the paradox of power is that we become most powerful when we give our own power away . . . we get our power from the people we lead. (pp. 284-288)

The above quotation describes the means of generating productive power relations between teachers as leaders and students as self-regulated adult learners. Should acknowledgement of students' informal evaluation occur and negative classroom power relations become a less dominant factor, then learning interactions may become more successful.

The power of the powerless.

The human need for social alliance in power relations that could conceptually be transferred to the adult classroom is further addressed in a broader context through Havel's (1978) essay entitled *The Power of the Powerless*. He argues:

People living in the midst of oppressive systems can live an independent life if they are encouraged to turn away from the system's universalizing structures and create small, face-to-face 'parallel structures', social alliances that usurp the role of the system. . . . in sum, they shatter the

world of appearances and unmask the real nature of power. (cited in Britton, 1996, pp. 102-103)

Put in context, what students say to each other about their classroom experiences in their informal day to day interactions may gradually generate credibility, and thus influence the formal evaluations of teaching effectiveness. Over time, student opinions that may be good, bad or indifferent will likely have exposed the real nature of power and gained momentum through the informal communication network.

Usher, Bryant, and Johnston (1997) and Brookfield (1993) suggest “. . . [Educators] act to change material and social conditions of oppressed people as well as the commonly held assumptions that reinforce their oppression” (cited in Kilgore, 2001, p. 55). Perhaps it would be beneficial for teachers to regularly seek informal evaluative comments from otherwise silenced students and consider them credible, to improve overall teaching effectiveness.

I agree with Brookfield's (1990) description of authenticity of teachers and the trust that is crucial to learning - - “teachers respect learners by listening carefully to students' expressions of concern, by taking care to create opportunities for students' voices to be heard, and by being open to changing their practice as a result of students' suggestions” (pp. 163-164). Furthermore, Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1998) contend “if all learners are to thrive, adult educators must go beyond the facilitator's role to directly negotiate the power dynamics in the classroom” (p. 389).

Brookfield (2001) states “Foucault's analysis of power has direct implications for common practices found in institutionally sponsored, formal programs of adult education

(p. 22) . . . power flows around the body politic and around the adult classroom, rather than being located at one clearly discernable point” (p. 7). This concept is further substantiated by Johnson-Bailey & Cervero (1998) who state “in traditional academic settings, it is assumed that the professor has the ability to control and shape the environment more than any other single person” (p. 394).

So the question now becomes focused on how informal student evaluation can gain acknowledgement and credibility to offset disturbing power relations in the teacher-student relationship. Power relations within higher educational institutions are exposed through less traditional means of communication that have proven credible in similar circumstances.

Less Traditional and Comparable Means of Informal Communication

Two examples of informal communication were selected for this study and are examined in this section as communication methods also used by students as a means of resistance to power. The metaphor of water-cooler talk and computer mediated communication certainly exist within higher educational institutions and support the concept of accepting informal student evaluation of teaching effectiveness.

The Metaphor of Water-cooler Talk

It is beneficial to this study to compare communication networks in public organisations with those of private organisations. Public higher education institutions, similar to private organisations, have a formal communication network (maintained and enforced by management) and an informal communication network (the metaphor of

‘water-cooler talk’) that flows within the institution. Also, public higher education institutions, similar to private organisations, have a mission and mandate to fulfill and function with management and staff to administer the operation, to recruit consumers, to be the front-line contacts, and to serve paying customers. Effective communication is foundational to the success of both public and private organisations.

Denning, 2001, describes the difference between and the impact of the formal and informal communication network:

In textbooks, the organisation is often made to seem like a piece of well-greased machinery. Everybody who works in the organisation knows what it is all about and is concerned principally with implementing its mission...[in the real world] everything seems to be falling rapidly apart. A situation not far from chaos reigns. Nobody really knows what is going on. (pp. 41-42)

The above distinction between “the two faces of an organisation” is one of the oldest in the sociological literature (Brown & Duguid, 2000, p. 113). Furthermore, the basis for successful knowledge management within the organisation lies in identifying where within its ‘two faces’ knowledge exists, and how that knowledge is put in motion. This concept also relates to knowledge management within post-secondary educational institutions.

A study carried out by the Center for Workforce Development in the United States, involving 1,000 employees, reported that up to 70% of all workplace learning is *informal*. Pfeffer & Sutton (1999) describe this informal learning as being “unbudgeted, unplanned, and uncaptured by the organisation... [it] occurs in dozens of daily activities,

including participating in meetings, interactions with customers, supervising or being supervised, mentoring others, communicating with peers, and training others on the job” (p. 398).

In other words, it could be argued that the already existing and valuable *informal* flow of information in organisations is being ignored while *formal*, less effective strategies are employed. Likewise, ignoring the *informal* student evaluation of teaching effectiveness may represent a significant loss of valuable information for the educational system. The interpretive content analysis conducted in this study produced evidence that informal student evaluation of teaching effectiveness, while not traditional, is both a useful and credible source for current information.

Davenport and Prusak (1998) provide further support of informal networks as a means of receiving ongoing and current information by stating “formal networks go stale almost as soon as they are established but informal networks, precisely because they are dynamic, never do” (p. 38). Similarly, when one realizes that, as a result of power relation issues, formal student evaluation of teaching effectiveness tends not to be taken seriously and often does not generate change in the teaching and learning process, then one can understand the potentially high value of ongoing informal student evaluation to improve both the classroom and institutional experience (Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002).

Brookfield (1986) also comments on the importance of empowerment in adult education:

Empowering and developing in adults a sense that their personal power and self-worth is seen as a fundamental purpose of all education and training efforts [is essential]. Only if such a sense of individual

empowerment is realized will adults possess the emotional strength to challenge behaviours, values and beliefs accepted uncritically by a majority. (p. 283)

Although mentioned earlier in this chapter, it bears repeating that teachers must also acknowledge that adult students are likely to remain anonymous to authority figures, back away from in-class conflict and not formally report inappropriate teaching attitudes and behaviours (Braxton, Bayer, & Noseworthy, 2002). As an alternative and while still remaining anonymous, students make public their suppressed evaluation of teaching ineffectiveness through the ‘*informal student grapevine*’ by contributing to an online faculty rating system or other means of computer mediated communication.

The Social Presence of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)

Students frequently use on-line media, such as MSN (Microsoft network) chat rooms or posted BLOGs (web-logs) to communicate emotion, feelings, and mood which are the defining characteristics of social presence as described by Garrison, et al. (2000). The capacity or power of CMC to support highly affective interpersonal interactions is supported by studies that focus on its use in educational settings.

Preference for computer mediated communication.

Walther (1994) describes CMC as, in some cases, “*hyper-personal*” rather than impersonal and also cites several studies in which experienced CMC users rated text-based media, including e-mail and computer conferencing, “as rich or richer than telephone conversations and face-to-face conversations” (p. 18). Weiss and Morrison

(1998) conducted a content analysis of a course conducted entirely through CMC. They found that 27% of the total message content consisted of expressions of feeling, self-introductions, jokes, compliments, greetings and closures. They also studied the development of group dynamics in educational computer conference settings and found that expressions of openness and solidarity were significant elements rising from 18% to 40% of the total respectively when the conference began to 36% and 54% at its conclusion. Weiss and Morrison (1998), at first skeptical about the capacity of computer conferencing as “it would result in dry dialogue devoid of emotion” (p. 446), later revealed multiple instances of humour and some episodes of hurt feelings. They added an extra category to their coding instruments to capture the overwhelming amount of social interchange that was occurring in their analysis of a computer conference, an amount that was significantly higher than any of the other content they were measuring.

Henri's (1991) model for content analysis of transcribed computer-mediated communication revealed student messages as “lengthy, cognitively deep, embedded with peer references, and indicative of a student oriented environment; students were using high level cognitive skills such as inference and judgment as well as meta-cognitive strategies related to reflecting on experience and self-awareness” (p. 117).

Power within self-disclosure and social alliance.

The psychological explanation of social attraction and bonding between individuals includes self-disclosure. Cutler (1995) explains that “the more one discloses personal information, the more others will reciprocate, and the more individuals know about each other, the more likely they are to establish trust, seek support, and thus find

satisfaction” (p. 17). For example, CMC offers access to the *‘informal student grapevine’* that provides individuals the opportunity to: hear details about classroom experience; seek collaboration; and through self-disclosure, express vulnerability. A student may openly admit on-line that she just doesn’t understand a question, is really frustrated that the textbook is not helpful and that her teacher failed to explain the concept - - she may also ask if anyone else feels the same. Similar comments may be heard informally in the locker room or at other campus locations, however CMC allows individuals to maintain their personal power by presumably remaining anonymous to authority (Braxton, Bayer, & Noseworthy, 2002).

One of the objectives of my research was to determine if credible informal student evaluation of teaching effectiveness can be acknowledged in a beneficial and democratic manner to improve the classroom experience. This examination of the literature on the topics of teaching effectiveness in post-secondary education, power relations in higher education and less traditional processes of communication has provided a valuable means to that end.

Chapter Summary

This chapter investigated three emergent themes related to informal student evaluation of effective teaching characteristics through a review of academic literature.

The first theme reviewed the empirical research on teaching effectiveness in post-secondary education and revealed students’ perceptions of characteristics of effective college teachers. Both reviews serve as a baseline measure for the analysis of attributions and the interpretive content analysis of this study.

The second theme examined power relations in higher education. Foucault's analysis of power and how power relations interfere with student evaluation of teaching effectiveness in adult education settings were discussed.

The third theme investigated two less traditional but comparable means of informal communication linked to informal student methods of evaluating teaching effectiveness including the metaphor of water cooler talk and the use of computer mediated communication.

Although a substantive literature review is essential to all research, it is of particular importance within the qualitative phase of this study. The findings of the interpretive analysis discussed in Chapter Four distinctly rely on references to past empirical research on teaching effectiveness. I will show how the findings may support and/or contradict prior studies to give further insight to this study.

Each theme in this chapter provided background and context for the research question: What can we learn from students' anecdotal perceptions of the characteristics of effective teaching, posted on an informal online faculty rating system?

CHAPTER THREE

PROCEDURES

This mixed methods inquiry explored the individual meanings embedded in the data collection of 300 on-line student comments, accessed on the Rate My Professors web-site, through quantitative analysis of attributions followed by qualitative interpretive analysis. This two-phased explanatory approach was designed to investigate the research question: What can we learn from students' anecdotal perceptions of effective teaching characteristics posted on an informal online faculty rating system?

The guiding question for the quantitative phase is: Assuming that students' perceptions are valid and reliable measures of effective teaching characteristics, which descriptive attributions are most commonly reported in this study? The guiding question for the qualitative phase is: How might the interpretations of the informal on-line comments offer important evidence for college teachers interested in improving their practice?

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Provide evidence of the students' under acknowledged ability to discern and report effective teaching practice to promote transformation in how informal student evaluations are viewed and applied within the college classroom.
2. Promote a greater acceptance of informal student evaluation as a credible and beneficial commentary to affect change.
3. Problematise, through the lens of adult education, ideas around teaching and learning in the college system.

4. Contribute to strengthening teacher-student relationships and classroom interaction to improve teachers' understanding of their students' learning needs.
5. Develop recommendations to promote characteristics of effective teaching.

Glesne (1999) reminds us “we conduct inquiry via a particular paradigm because it embodies assumptions about the world that we believe and the values we hold” (p. 8). With this in mind, I was very aware that my role as researcher could not be separated from my personal experiences as both a long-term adult student and an experienced college teacher. I realized that my phenomenological life experiences would become integral to the research and prove valuable in the interpretive analysis of the student comments that are also phenomenological in nature.

Research Approach

Why Use a Mixed Methods Research Design?

As reported earlier, volumes of quantitative studies exist in the area of formal, institutional student evaluation of teaching effectiveness. While quantitative approaches are dominant in this topic area, authors recognized the limitations of strictly quantitative approaches in their research and suggested future quantitative research be augmented by qualitative studies of students' anecdotal written comments (Pan, et al., 2008). Furthermore, Glesne (1999) supports the use of qualitative modes of data collection as “being best at contributing a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and

processes” (p. 24) and as such I agreed that qualitative approaches were appropriate to lift the voice of students.

From these two perspectives I decided to design my study using a mixed methods framework that would allow the benefit of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to yield the most thorough interpretation of the complex data, with the greater emphasis on the qualitative approach. Also, as discussed fully in Chapter Four, the data is very rich in content and too complex to be singularly treated by either a quantitative or qualitative approach. The ideal design for this study therefore was to start with the quantitative approach to provide the manifest content of the data (Berg, 2009) with a follow up qualitative approach to obtain more extensive information and unearth the latent or underlying symbolism of the student comments (Berg, 2009).

Specifically, I used an explanatory mixed methods design (or two-phase model; Creswell, 2005) to treat the data. I first employed a quantitative method of analysis to help focus the more complex qualitative exploration of the data. Although the quantitative phase occurred first in sequence, the qualitative data held far greater weight and emphasis due to its complexity and relationship to the academic literature, [quan → QUAL , Creswell, 2005].

Brewer and Hunter (1989) describe a mixed methods research design as “a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and ‘mixing’ both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study to understand a research problem; it is a legitimate inquiry approach” (p. 28). As such, this study’s research design was framed to most effectively reveal adult students’ underlying perceptions and discover their discernment of effective teaching characteristics as reported through their RMP anonymous online postings.

Phase One - Quantitative Analysis of Attributions

I was immediately motivated to conduct an analysis of attributions as the first phase of the data treatment after reading Krippendorff's (2004) description "the words that make attributions real are acquired, largely in conversations, but also through reading and attending to various media of communication . . . texts are instrumental in disseminating and creating attributions" (p. 76). Also, I chose analysis of attributions as it would yield the repetitiveness and therefore the importance of, attention to, or emphasis on certain characteristics in the findings (Krippendorff, 2004).

The analysis of attributions method I employed first thoroughly captured *all* descriptive adjectives within 300 comments and then narrowed this rich abundance of data into attribution themes representing the students' underlying perceptions of effective teaching characteristics. Without this first phase quantitative analysis the broader interpretive analysis would have been unwieldy. This initial method of analysis also responded to its guiding question by determining the descriptive attributions that students most commonly reported in this study that will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

Phase Two - Qualitative Content Analysis: Interpretive Analysis Approach

The essence of this study is reflected in Berg's (2009) description of interpretive content analysis as "a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings" (p. 338). Through their informal on-line postings, students voiced their perceptions and exposed the realities of their classroom experiences, which are fundamental and critical

to this study. I conceptually engaged myself within the study by allowing the student voice to emerge and speak to me, disclosing individual and shared meanings from each anecdotal comment. There was usually more than one significant message embedded within each anecdote which further supported the concept of student discernment of effective teaching from a multi-faceted and complex perspective. I re-articulated each student anecdote and then presented a narrative supported by textual evidence from the anecdotes and the consulted literature. I also problematised the complex and multi-faceted commentary to add renewed perspective. The findings of the phase two interpretive analysis are narrated in Chapters Four and Five and respond to the guiding question of how my interpretive analysis of informal on-line student anecdotes offers important evidence for college teachers interested improving their teaching practice.

My interpretation of each anecdotal comment was supported by my content knowledge and adult education experience and was also evidenced by the empirical data that defines characteristics of effective teaching.

Role of the Researcher

Qualifications.

I am qualified to take the role of researcher based on continuous years as an undergraduate and graduate student specializing in the fields of adult education and curriculum and instruction that led to my doctoral studies. Additionally I have experienced more than twenty years of successful college teaching, presenting the topics of professionalism, ethics, and interpersonal communication. I have also served as Vice-chair of Education Council and as College Curriculum Chair and co-written and

published a Psychology Instructor's Manual and a Study Guide for Students. Finally, I am a Presentation and Instructional Skills Workshop facilitator and trainer who conducts workshops on effective teaching strategies.

Assumptions

My assumptions include my beliefs that:

1. Teachers and adult students will benefit from this study as partners in education.
2. Students are motivated to unearth their stories about classroom experiences, as they have had limited opportunity to openly and formally discuss their concerns within the power structure of the educational institution.
3. Students have the power to provide meaningful evaluation of effective teaching.
4. Informal evaluations are as equally valid as formal evaluations.

Selection and Description of the Site and Sample

The research was conducted by accessing the vast data base of informal anecdotal online faculty ratings located on the public domain of www.Ratemyprofessors.ca, described in Chapter One, and by assuring a *purposeful* (random) selection of the college sites in British Columbia, the rated professors, and the students' evaluative anecdotes. Please note that I have used the more quantitative term "random" within my writing as it is an appropriate term for this section.

The random selection I constructed is guided by Palys (2003) who emphasizes that:

Two criteria are essential for random selection: nothing but chance must govern the selection process, and every sampling element must have an equal probability of being selected. If these criteria are met the resulting sample will be representative of the population included in the sampling frame. (p. 130)

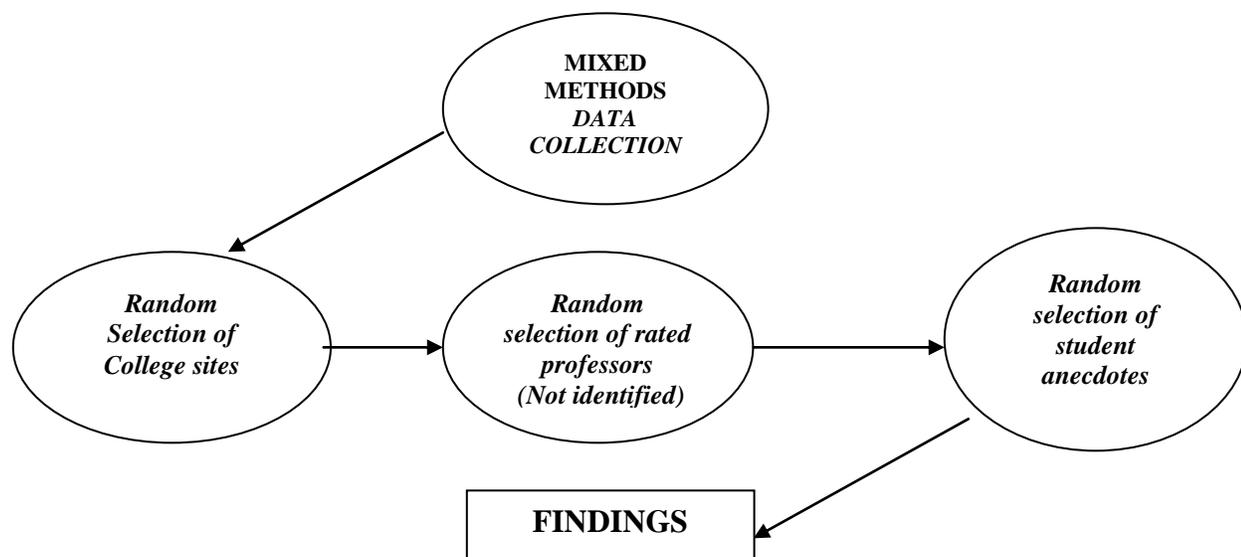
The sampling procedure was designed to give each of the twelve Community Colleges in British Columbia an equal chance of selection regardless of student population size and internal popularity of RMP. Three colleges were randomly selected and only identified as Sites A, B, and C. Subsequently, all faculty ratings randomly chosen within each college site were selected with equal probability. There were a total of 300 anecdotal online ratings randomly selected from the three college sites available for text-only analysis. The sample of student comments from RMP was determined on a percentage basis according to the total number of faculty rated at each of the three selected colleges. Based on the RMP professor information on the dates of collection, there were 450 professors rated at the first college, 582 professors rated at the second college, and 467 professors rated at the third college, generating a total 1479 ratings. Therefore, Site A accounts for 30.42% (450) of the total of 1479 ratings, Site B has 37.99 % (562) of the total of 1479 ratings, and Site C has 31.57% (467) of the total of 1479 ratings. Based on this selection method, the total sample size of 300 ratings consisted of 91 student comments from Site A, 114 student comments from Site B, and 95 student comments from Site C.

Data Collection Strategies

Data in the form of randomly selected anecdotal descriptions and perceptions about students' classroom interactions and experiences, within the three randomly selected college sites, were electronically collected for analysis of attributions and interpretive analysis through access to the online public domain *RateMyProfessors.ca*. Figure 3.1 provides an illustration of the data collection strategies. I accessed the three randomly selected college sites A, B, and C, then for each site, utilized a unique pattern of random professor selection. Professors are listed alphabetically within their respective institutions on the RMP web-site. I randomly selected these alphabetical links to the professors (for example only accessed letters A, D, J, S, and T). I then selected every fifth listed professor and then selected every third anecdotal comment until I had reached the percentage total of analyzed texts per college site. I followed this pattern as closely as possible and only deviated occasionally when the selected fifth listed professor had less than three anecdotal comments or only had a numerical rating. I then selected the next listed professor with greater than two anecdotal comments. Also, for one site, I ran short of the professors listed under my pre-determined alphabet selection and added additional letters to reach the required percentage.

[Space left intentionally to accommodate Figure 3.1]

Figure 3.1 Illustration of Data Collection Strategies



Anonymity.

The University of Victoria granted my application for a waiver from full ethical review of research involving human participants based on this research being limited to secondary analysis of anonymized data. Specifically, I did not disclose student identity and I fully protected the identities of randomly selected faculty. Within the data collection process, students' anecdotal comments were not linked to individual professors in any manner. I am confident that my system of data collection is not traceable to assure confidentiality.

Data Analysis Approach for the Analysis of Attributions

My first step in the analysis was to list *all* the attributions (defined as multiple adjectives that qualify nouns) used by students in their 300 anecdotal comments to

describe effective teaching characteristics (that were either present or absent in the classroom experience). Krippendorff (2004) describes the analysis index related to the *presence or absence* of a reference or concept that is “taken to indicate the source’s awareness or knowledge of the object referred to or conceptualized” (p. 59).

In context to this study, the students’ choices of attributions or adjectives that described the teachers’ characteristics and teaching styles demonstrated their awareness and knowledge of the concept of effective teaching. Student discernment was also evidenced by their ability to report characteristics that were either present or absent; more discussion of the findings will follow in Chapter Four.

I interpreted the attributions (adjectives) as part of a simple noun phrase headed by the noun they modified; for example, *caring* is an attribution adjective in “a caring teacher”. I also interpreted modified attribution adjectives that followed the noun and noted phrases that were acting as adverbs; for example, “the teacher cared enough to help me”.

Then, to provide a standard against which similarities and deviations in the listed attribution adjectives could be noted, I turned to Chapter Two, my literature review, to list the attribution adjectives used by educators and researchers within the empirical data that defines either effective or ineffective teaching practice. I compared the adjective lists generated from student comments to determine which attributes were shared and which attributes differentiate to add to the analysis of attributions. The congruence from the two lists became noteworthy and is discussed further in Chapter Four.

Finally, I sorted the attributions by their definitions that generated a lengthy thesaurus of synonyms and antonyms. From this student-generated thesaurus six

attribution themes emerged, that interestingly created the acronym *ACCEPT*. Please refer to Appendix C to view the attributions chart.

I subsequently titled the set of attribution themes: The *ACCEPT* Model of Student Discernment of Effective Teaching. Through the use of their descriptive attributions students are seeking effective teachers who can be characterized as: **A**rticulate, **C**ompetent, **C**ontent-experts, **E**mpowering, **P**erceptive and **T**rustworthy. This final step of the analysis of attributions set the stage for the second phase of the data treatment. More details about the attribution themes are presented with the findings in Chapter Four.

Data Analysis Approach for the Interpretive Analysis

The interpretive approaches used in this study share common characteristics including: a close reading of relatively small amounts of textual matter; re articulation (interpretation) of given texts into qualitative narratives; and analysts' acknowledgement of participation within hermeneutic circles.

Furthermore, Krippendorff (2004) believes it is fair to say:

Qualitative scholars find themselves in a hermeneutic circle, using known literature to contextualize their readings of given texts, rearticulating the meanings of those texts in view of the assumed contexts, and allowing research questions and answers to arise together in the course of their involvement with the given texts . . . [and scholars acknowledge] the open-ended and always tentative nature of text interpretation. (p. 87)

I believe that the interpretive approach used in this study clearly answered the research question as disclosed in Chapters Four and Five, and posed new questions for future

study that are discussed in Chapter Six.

I chose an interpretive analysis approach for the purpose of re-articulating students' anecdotal online commentary about teaching effectiveness. Hijman's (1996) typology of qualitative content analyses describes interpretive analysis as the technique that focuses on the formation of theory from the observation of messages and the coding of those messages; "This differs from scientific inquiry in its wholly qualitative nature; the researcher is assumed to be a competent observer" (p. 103).

Krippendorff (2004) defines interpretive analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (p. 18). Also, Krippendorff's definition includes the contributions of analysts within the process and states that "recognizing meanings is the reason that researchers engage in [interpretive] analysis, rather than some other kind of investigative method" (p. 21).

The interpretive process of discovery I have undertaken in this study is described by Berg (2009) who suggests that a researcher with a phenomenological orientation [self-identified] might "attempt to uncover or capture the telos (essence) of an account and discover the practical understandings of meanings and actions" (p. 339). I followed through with this approach as I interpreted 300 on-line anecdotal student comments.

The findings in this study (answers) came from the anecdotal comments (texts) and from my abductive inferences (defined as interpretations from phenomena that are not directly observable). However, according to Krippendorff (2004) "it follows that an analyst's reading must never be taken as the only legitimate one, nor should the content analysts assume the sole power to determine the form of the texts they analyze" (p. 31). I

understand that the same messages I interpreted could yield different findings when examined by different analysts or different groups of readers. To overcome this variance in interpretation I made key abductive inferences to guide the process of examining text to discover answers, then was able to re-articulate (interpret) the online anecdotal comments. Also, for the analysis to be replicable, I provided narrative explanations of the context that guided my inferences. Finally, as discussed in Chapter One, I problematised the content through the lens of adult education to provide additional perspective.

Qualitative narrative on the interpretive analysis.

As noted above, each student's anecdotal message was bracketed to reduce it to its most significant elements (or rearticulated meaning) related to the various characteristics of effective teaching. Please refer to Table 3.1 to view the analysis of attributions and interpretive analysis instrument used in the analyses.

Based on textual evidence (i.e., student anecdotes from the data collection), my qualifications, and the academic literature on effective teaching characteristics, I qualitatively narrated my findings (to make them comprehensible) in response to the research question: What can we learn from students' anecdotal perceptions of effective teaching characteristics, posted on an online faculty rating system?

In Chapter Four I explain the practical significance of the analysis of attributions and the interpretive analysis findings for the purpose of making the analyses worthwhile. This in turn, leads to the conclusions and recommendations stemming from this study (provided in Chapter Six).

CHARACTERISTICS EXPERIENCED (Present) Random selected online evaluative student anecdote:	Interpretive Analysis: Reararticulated Meaning	Analysis of Attributions
Awesome teacher. Freakishly smart. Helpful and his lectures are informative and he has a good sense of humour. He'll challenge you and makes sure you learn the material. He should teach other instructors in the program how to teach.	Student is appreciative of instructor's knowledge and presentation, including humour, with the goal of challenging the student to learn	Awesome Smart Humorous Helpful Informative Challenging
CHARACTERISTICS <u>NOT</u> EXPERIENCED (Absent) Randomly selected online evaluative student anecdote:	Interpretive Analysis: Reararticulated Meaning	Analysis of Attributions
Does not follow curriculum, inconsistent marker, hard to follow in class	Student is dissatisfied with the absence of content, inconsistency in marking and lack of clarity in presenting the content	Inconsistent Unclear

Table 3.1 Analysis of Attributions and Interpretive Analysis Instrument

Methods of Achieving Reliability, Validity, Trustworthiness, and Credibility

Hundreds of quantitative studies of teaching effectiveness have determined that *formal* institutional student ratings are generally both reliable (i.e., yielding similar results consistently) and valid (i.e., measuring what the instrument is supposed to measure) (Seldin, 1993). For this mixed-method study, I have established the reliability and validity of the quantitative analysis of attributions and established the trustworthiness and credibility of the qualitative interpretive analysis that were both based on students' perceptions of effective teaching characteristics posted on an *informal* online faculty rating system.

I am confident that the mixed methods analyses were supported ethically and effectively throughout both of the analysis procedures and when aligning my findings with the empirical data related to effective teaching characteristics. The data collection and analyses strategies proved quantitatively valid and qualitatively credible to both the question and the process.

Achieving Reliability and Validity of the Quantitative Analysis of Attributions

I conducted two types of reliability assessments that tested for stability and reproducibility at the front end of my analysis of attributions (Krippendorff, 2004). Firstly, stability testing occurred to ensure that the retrieval of *all* attributions yielded the same results on repeated trials by the same analyst (i.e., test-retest). Secondly, reproducibility testing occurred to confirm the degree to which the process could be replicated by different analysts under varying conditions, but using the same data collection instrument (i.e., test-test).

A qualified adult educator reviewed my lists of attributions collected from the data and selected literature review, and the subsequent attribution themes, to establish the validity of the data collection instrument (Table 3.1) and the measurements of my analysis of attributions. The emergence of the attributions into themes proved consistent and reliable.

Achieving Trustworthiness of the Qualitative Interpretive Analysis

Krippendorff (2004) states “Analytical constructs [and standards] ensure that an analysis of given texts, models the texts’ context of use” (p. 35). For this qualitative phase of analysis, an application of standards constructed for identifying themes was applied in two steps: (1) judging what was entailed in the data analysis process to interpret (rearticulate) the anecdotal comments, and (2) aligning my findings with empirical research related to effective teaching characteristics in post-secondary settings.

A qualified adult educator reviewed my interpretation of the data with a critical eye and questioned only 8 (.026%) of my 300 interpretations; we subsequently reached consensus on the interpretation of the messages in question. The differences between our interpretations were insignificant and the interpretive analysis was deemed trustworthy.

Establishing trustworthiness of the findings from the interpretive analysis was particularly important to this study because the retrieved data is intentionally *informal* and was purposefully accessed from the minimally censored RMP site. Stringer (1999) emphasizes that researchers must provide verification “that the procedure and processes of inquiry have minimized the possibility that the investigation was superficial, biased or insubstantial” (p. 176). From this directive and by the choice of thematic distinctions for

the interpretive, inferential analysis, I was particularly cognizant of potential inconsistencies that might challenge the credibility of the findings.

Access and Permissions

Ethical considerations in this study were directed by the University of Victoria guidelines for involving human participants. A University of Victoria Application for a Waiver from a Full Ethical Review of Research Involving Human Participants was submitted and granted based on research that is limited to secondary analyses of anonymized data. Please refer to Appendix A. The source of data exists within the public domain at www.Ratemyprofessors.com. The RMP Privacy Policy is provided in Appendix B. Specifically, student identity was not disclosed within the RMP website and the identities of randomly selected faculty were fully protected by the researcher. Within the data collection process, students' anecdotal comments were not linked to individual professors in any manner as the analysis of attributions and interpretive content analysis only themed the anecdotal message.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This study was designed to interpret the perceptions of adult students and discover their discernment of effective teaching characteristics as reported through their anonymous online postings. To best narrate the findings I have organized this chapter into two sections: (1) Findings of the Analysis of Attributions (that yielded six themes derived from the students' descriptive attributions), and (2) Findings of the Interpretive Analysis (organized in the six attribution themes with examples of student comments that discern either the presence or absence of effective teaching characteristics).

The findings revealed a strong alignment between student informal evaluative comments and what the academic literature deems to be effective teaching – illustrating that adult students are able to discern effective teaching characteristics. Students provided *their* perceptions that reflected *their* reality of *their* classroom experience. Through the lens of adult education it is clear that many comments were well informed and accurate and contribute to our understandings of teaching effectiveness. Other comments, however, were more problematic or perhaps better said, complex, requiring a more critical and thoughtful analysis which I provide in Chapter Five. Of the 300 anecdotal comments collected, 148 reflected what students understood to be effective teaching characteristics and 152 reflected ineffective teaching characteristics, showing a near equal rating of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in college classroom experiences. In essence, students spoke about what worked and did not work for them in terms of the teaching and learning dynamic. The students' comments were extensive and multi-dimensional and provided a very rich set of data that can inform teaching and learning

practice in all its complexity. As I perused each comment I was struck by the understandable logic in what was being described; students were clearly articulating their experiences of the varied aspects of effective and ineffective teaching. Their provocative comments raised my awareness of the complex relationship that exists between teaching and learning within the wide range of course offerings typical of a community college.

College students who are enrolled in competency based studies have a sense of what they should be learning and anticipate the often pragmatic text and content-specific curriculum necessary for job and career-training. This is particularly evident in Health and Human Service programs or in Trades programs wherein public safety is a critical factor and external licensing board examinations are required. Faculty and graduates are highly accountable and neither can afford the consequences of haphazard instruction. Other students undertaking Arts and Science independent courses or programs of university transfer studies, may have raised expectations of achieving high grades and retaining transferable knowledge in order to be competitive in future studies. Regardless of the motivation, students of various ages and backgrounds are understandably seeking effective instruction within their college experience, as was determined in this study.

As outlined in the previous chapter, to validate the accuracy of my findings I drew from multiple sources and triangulated information to corroborate the evidence. To best capture what students were saying in their anecdotal comments, to avoid oversight, and to prevent the content analysis from becoming unwieldy, I undertook the processes of an analysis of attributions and an interpretive analysis. I also drew from the literature review of teaching effectiveness in post-secondary education and my professional experience as a college teacher and years as an adult student. These sources all

contributed to my interpretation of the latent symbolism college students provided through their informal online comments.

I now invite you to listen to what students are telling us and discover what we can learn about their perceptions of effective teaching characteristics, but first, allow me to re-acquaint you with the various messengers from the college communities.

Who is speaking?

As discussed in Chapters One and Three, anecdotal online comments were collected from British Columbia college students studying in the areas of Arts and Science, Business, Health and Human Services, Trades, and Technology. Their comments were linked to random courses that: (1) are typically offered within community colleges (academic-university transfer, career-vocational, trades, and technology); (2) are designed for adult learners; and (3) lead to associate degrees, bachelor degrees, certificates and diplomas. The three college sites randomly selected for this study are located in urban settings, with mid-sized student populations (averaging to approximately 20,000 students) with the majority age range of 18-39 years.

Findings of the Analysis of Attributions

The Analysis of Attributions yielded considerable *manifest content*, described by Berg (2009) as “elements that are physically present and countable” (p. 343). From this analysis I generated a significant ‘thesaurus’ of attributions (adjectives) and responded to the study’s quantitative phase guiding question: Assuming that students’ perceptions are valid and reliable measures of effective teaching characteristics, which descriptive

attributions are most commonly reported in this study? Table 4.1 details the six attribution themes that emerged from the data, that interestingly created the acronym ACCEPT. Students are seeking teachers who can be characterized as: Articulate, Competent, Content-experts, Empowering, Perceptive, and Trustworthy (The ACCEPT Model of Student Discernment of Effective Teaching Characteristics). Appendix C provides the chart of attributes derived from the students' anecdotal comments that by their definitions represent the presence or absence of effective teaching characteristics.

Table 4.1 The ACCEPT Model of Student Discernment of Effective Teaching Characteristics.

Students are seeking teachers who in their professional practise are:	Description of themes emerging from the analysis of attributions derived from students' comments:
<u>A</u> RTICULATE	Teachers provide consistent, clear and distinctly accurate instruction to facilitate and direct the teaching and learning process.
<u>C</u> OMPETENT	Teachers are qualified to instruct in adult education settings and exhibit skills expected of the teaching profession. They are organized and prepared for content delivery in an interactive style, and understand strategies to fairly and effectively assess learning.
<u>C</u> ONTENT-EXPERTS	Teachers are current, informative, reality-based content experts with substantive experience in their topic areas that may include their academic research background, or their career background, or their trades or industry background.
<u>E</u> MPOWERING	Teachers empower students in their learning to build self-confidence and assertiveness. Teachers challenge, motivate and encourage adult learners to think independently and critically.
<u>P</u> ERCEPTIVE	Teachers display a high level of authenticity and credibility including insight, intuition, and humour. Perceptive teachers care about the success of their students and are approachable.
<u>T</u> RUSTWORTHY	Teachers are aware of their professional, ethical and moral obligations in relation to the trust relationship of teaching. Teachers are respectful in thought and reliable in action and have earned the students' confidence.

This study focuses primarily on what we can learn from informal student evaluation of effective teaching characteristics that are described in Table 4.1. It is important to note that improved learning is anticipated through the practice of the *ACCEPT* characteristics of effective teaching. The following section further describes each attribution theme.

Attribution theme one – Articulate

The adjective ‘articulate’ is defined by students as being clear in speech. For example, when used in a simple noun phrase such as “the articulate teacher” one can interpret the phrase to mean that the teacher speaks coherently. When this attribution was present, students used synonyms in their anecdotal comments, such as ‘directive’ and ‘understandable’. When the attribution was absent, students used antonyms in their anecdotal comments such as ‘incomprehensible’ and ‘contradictory’.

The literature review also yielded lists of adjectives related to ‘articulate’ that described effective or ineffective teaching characteristics. Examples of synonyms embedded in the literature included ‘explicit’ and ‘expressive’; antonyms included ‘inarticulate’ and ‘not directive’.

Attribution theme two – Competent

The adjective ‘competent’ is defined by students as being able. For example, when used in a simple noun phrase such as “the competent teacher” one can interpret the phrase to mean that the teacher is able to perform teaching skills. When this attribution was present, students used synonyms in their anecdotal comments, such as ‘organized’

and ‘prepared’. When the attribution was absent, students used antonyms in their anecdotal comments such as ‘bad’ and ‘unskilled’.

The literature review also yielded lists of adjectives related to ‘competent’ that described effective or ineffective teaching characteristics (Patrick and Smart, 1998). Examples of synonyms embedded in the literature included ‘transmissive’ and ‘systematic’; antonyms included ‘inconsistent’ and ‘unqualified’.

Attribution theme three – Content-expert

A content-expert is defined by students as one who is knowledgeable within their area of specialty or expertise. The adjective ‘knowledgeable’ is defined as being aware and educated. For example, when used in a simple noun phrase such as “the knowledgeable professor” one can interpret the phrase to mean that the professor shows awareness and is educated in their ‘content’ or topic area. When this attribution was present, students used synonyms in their anecdotal comments, such as ‘brilliant’ and ‘intellectual’. When the attribution was absent, students used antonyms in their anecdotal comments such as ‘nonsensical’ and ‘ignorant’.

The literature review also yielded lists of adjectives related to content ‘knowledgeable’ that described effective or ineffective teaching characteristics. Examples of synonyms embedded in the literature included ‘stimulating’ and ‘wise’; antonyms included ‘uninformed’ and ‘is not knowledgeable’.

The adjective ‘expert’ is defined as being knowledgeable and proficient. For example, when used in a simple noun phrase such as “the expert science professor” one can interpret the phrase to mean that the scientist is qualified and skillful in his or her area of content expertise. When this attribution was present, students used synonyms in

their anecdotal comments, such as ‘realistic’ and ‘exceptional’. When the attribution was absent, students used antonyms in their anecdotal comments such as ‘inexperienced’ and ‘inaccurate’.

The literature review also yielded lists of adjectives related to ‘expert’ that described effective or ineffective teaching characteristics. Synonyms embedded in the literature included ‘informative’ and ‘provocative’; antonyms included ‘amateur’ and ‘novice’.

Attribution theme four – Empowering

The adjective ‘empowering’ is defined as shifting power to or enabling. For example when used in a simple noun phrase such as “the empowering teacher” one can interpret the phrase to mean that the teacher enabled students to grow in personal confidence and ability. When this attribution was present, students used synonyms in their anecdotal comments such as ‘motivational’ and ‘encouraging’. When the attribution was absent, students used antonyms in their anecdotal comments such as ‘self-absorbed’ and ‘discouraging’ (not allowing independence and control).

The literature review also yielded lists of adjectives describing teaching characteristics that led to empowerment of students. Examples of synonyms embedded in the literature included students being ‘informed’ (knowledge is power) and ‘skilled’ (acting from knowledge and values); antonyms included ‘inequality’ (power and control is held by the teacher) and ‘non-confident’ (student lacks confidence and assertiveness).

Attribution theme five – Perceptive

The adjective ‘perceptive’ is defined by students as being sensitive and aware. For example, when used in a simple noun phrase such as “the perceptive teacher” one can interpret the phrase to mean that the teacher is aware of the student’s needs. When this attribution was present, students used synonyms in their anecdotal comments, such as ‘personable’ and ‘approachable’. When the attribution was absent, students used antonyms in their anecdotal comments such as ‘indifferent’ and ‘distant’. More than half of the 300 anecdotal comments discussed the presence or absence of the ‘Perceptive’ attribution theme in the classroom. This finding is significant because earlier empirical research on teaching effectiveness repeatedly cited characteristics associated to sensitive, caring teachers (Patrick and Smart, 1998); (Feldman, 1988); McKeachie (cited in Hodges and Hand, 2005). It appears that caring, perceptive characteristics of effective teaching are highly desirable.

The literature review also yielded lists of adjectives related to ‘perceptive’ that described effective or ineffective teaching characteristics. Examples of synonyms embedded in the literature included ‘empathetic’ and ‘attentive’; antonyms included ‘aloof’ and ‘unaware’.

Attribution theme six – Trustworthy

The adjective ‘trustworthy’ relates to the students’ belief in the honesty and integrity of the teacher. For example, when used in a simple noun phrase such as “the trustworthy teacher” one can interpret this to mean that the teacher has gained the confidence of the students. When this attribution was present, students used synonyms in

their anecdotal comments, such as ‘reliable’ and ‘respectful’. When the attribution was absent, students used antonyms in their anecdotal comments such as ‘discriminatory’ and ‘condescending’.

The literature review also yielded lists of adjectives related to ‘trustworthy’ that described effective or ineffective teaching characteristics. Examples of synonyms embedded in the literature included ‘genuine’ and ‘diplomatic’; antonyms included ‘unethical’ and ‘unprofessional’.

Summary of the Attribution Findings – Connecting to the Interpretive Analysis

The findings of the attribution analysis illustrate the range of commonly defined adjectives from which the *ACCEPT* attribution themes emerged. As mentioned earlier in the findings, the attribution theme ‘Perceptive’ (including authenticity and credibility) provided the most dominant list of adjectives that describe both effective and ineffective teaching characteristics and that are closely linked to the teacher-student learning dynamic. This is interesting because the academic literature also reports that teaching effectiveness in adult environments is strongly influenced by the teacher’s authenticity and credibility (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004; Brookfield, 1990). In particular, within the ‘Perceptive’ theme the most dominant individual attribution (adjective) ‘humorous’ and its synonym ‘fun’, in contrast with its antonym ‘boring’, emerged consistently to indicate that students find humour beneficial to their learning environment. In the broader context of interpretation, student comments also indicated that they either appreciate caring, humorous, supportive teachers or are frustrated by uncaring, boring, and non-supportive teachers.

The attribution theme ‘Content Expert’ was the next most commonly reported, followed closely by the ‘Competent’ theme and then by the ‘Trustworthy’ theme. The ‘Articulate’ theme ranked next with the ‘Empowering’ theme showing the lowest repeated use of commonly defined attributions to describe both effective and ineffective teaching characteristics.

Further discussion of the findings of the analysis of attributions is interwoven with the findings of the interpretive analysis and again in Chapter Five.

Findings of the Interpretive Analysis

[Preface: In the process of editing this section of the dissertation I discovered that the student comments drew a variety of response from different readers, who as adult educators, found the multi-faceted student comments quite complex. As the researcher, I invite you to view each comment from your perspective; it may prove interesting to discover what elements of the messages resonate most for you.]

Having established the six *ACCEPT* themes from the analysis of attributions, I extended my thematic analysis of the students’ comments by rearticulating and interpreting the more *latent content*, defined by Berg (2009) as “the symbolism underlying the physically present data” (p. 344). From this approach I also responded to the study’s qualitative phase guiding question: How might the interpretations of the informal on-line comments offer important evidence for college teachers interested in improving their practice?

Please be Articulate - - We Need to Understand You to Succeed

<u>A</u>RTICULATE:	Teachers provide consistent, clear and distinctly accurate instruction to facilitate and direct the teaching and learning process.
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MacKeracher (1996) states:

The consequences of [classroom] learning can lead to disorientation and conflict, which in turn . . . can lead to increased distress and decreased learning . . . facilitators [teachers] should be prepared to halt learning activities periodically to help learners clarify issues, problems and concerns. (p. 73)

Anecdotes describing opposite student experiences illustrate MacKeracher's point:

He only wants the students to understand/appreciate the material correctly, nothing more. He's extremely flexible and willing to talk you through any issues you have with the course, even if it's not printed in the textbook. Highly recommended! (C92)

I found her to be quite challenging to follow. Her lectures do not correspond to the readings and she jumps a lot. Sometimes she has a hard time staying focused on the key point of the events and goes on discussion frenzies with students asking BS questions that were meaningless to what we need to be learning. (C73)

It sounds like the first student was appreciative of the teacher's style and willingness to address issues as they arise, whereas the second student was trying to grasp the meaning of the lecture while becoming distressed with the digression. Her message indicates that the teacher should stay on track and provide congruent references. The teacher, on the other hand, may have felt obligated to respond to the 'BS' questions, however perhaps she could have managed this situation differently by suggesting such questions be discussed after class to keep the focus on the lesson plan and to reduce distress in the other students.

It seems logical that teachers who are clear communicators generate motivated students (Bergen, et al., 1994). Within the ‘articulate’ theme satisfied students identified effective teaching strategies that motivated them to listen and learn:

He knows the material cold, and presents it in a manner that is both interesting and clear. (A62)

His explanations are really clear to understand and you will become more interested in the topic after taking his course. (B60)

In both reports students highlight the connection between the teachers’ level of clarity and their ability to sustain interest in the content which is often challenging in lengthy lectures or large class settings.

The next two comments provide comparison of a knowledgeable teacher who is easy to listen to and described in the first comment, with a teacher who just keeps talking, described in the second comment:

Easy to listen to and can talk for hours without repeating herself. She is bright, intelligent and very knowledgeable. (B63)

Disorganised! Absolute ineffective teaching style and she doesn't realize that. Just keeps talking and never cares if students understand or not. Messy writing. (C28)

The first student clearly experienced intellectual excitement in the presence of an effective teacher who knew how to hold the interest of her students (Lowman and Mathie, 1993). The second teacher’s non-stop talking did not allow time for reflection in the learning process that would have provided the student with greater management and control (MacKeracher, 1996). Taking time for a ‘pregnant’ pause in her lecture would allow her students time to reflect on the content and could lead to beneficial class participation. Also embedded in the second comment is a reminder that articulate

communication entails more than clearly spoken words and also includes written and non-verbal language (e.g., messy writing and lack of organisation). Further elaboration comes from these multi-faceted student comments about inarticulate communication:

A very disorganised Prof. He is always late, often searches through his papers to find what he is looking for, and flips through his overheads too quickly. He also writes vertically which is extremely annoying as well as difficult to read. I found his lectures were not useful; however attendance is mandatory because there is a quiz every class. (B101)

She is very eccentric and needs to learn how to use her indoor voice. I suggest not sitting at the front of the class. (A74)

He slurs and mumbles so much it is impossible to understand what he is saying. (B80)

These reports highlight student distraction from learning due to: messy writing, writing vertically on an overhead, poor organization, and problems with enunciation and voice projection. The students were trying to cope with an ineffective teaching style that could be so easily improved with more sensitivity and effort on the part of the teacher. In fact, key principles of effective teaching in higher education include concern and respect for students and their learning (Ramsden, 1992), and clear instructional presentation (Swartz, White and Stuck, 1990).

Further examples of inarticulate instruction were provided by the following students who took issue with the confusion they experienced after receiving unclear responses to a relevant content question or when seeking clear directions for assignments or examinations:

Ask him a question and his reply will confuse you even more. (C50)

He isn't clear in his directions – a big deal when the exam is focused on communication. (A6)

Similarly, other students also described the effect of the teachers' confusing and inaccurate responses that were destructive to the learning process and led to the anticipation of failure:

She is very vague and unhelpful. Her written instructions are confusing and inaccurate. Be prepared to fail the course. (C81)

Lectures were incomprehensible, confusing and sometimes even wrong; tests had many errors. (B2).

In contrast, these students' experiences of 'crystal clear' instruction and effective explanations illustrate what worked effectively for them:

Her teaching is crystal clear and she makes learning very easy. (C74).

He knows how to get the class involved in the questions and ensures everyone has an understanding that is crystal clear. He is very approachable for questions and explains things extremely well. (A14)

The dissatisfied students in this 'Articulate' theme section of the findings are pointing out some fairly obvious concerns that understandably would be distressful and a distraction to learning. If the students are unable to understand the teacher, then it is likely they would also be unable to understand the content. If the student is faced with poor writing that is difficult to decipher or non-verbal activity, such as the teacher appearing disorganized, then their focus is not on learning the content. Selye, (1956) summarized the effects of inarticulate instruction “. . . distress involves an expression of energy which is consequently not available for learning” (as cited in MacKeracher 1996, p. 65). I will elaborate further on this concept in the Chapter Five discussion.

According to this study's findings, derived from student reports of articulate teaching, students believe that the teacher's degree of clarity in written, verbal and non-verbal instruction is fundamental to their success. The latent symbolism of the

‘Articulate’ teaching characteristic theme indicates that students prefer to channel their energy into learning and are frustrated by the distraction of inarticulate instruction.

Please be Competent – We Need Your Best Teaching Skills to Guide our Success.

<u>COMPETENT:</u>	Teachers are qualified to instruct in adult education settings and exhibit skills expected of the teaching profession. They are organized and prepared for content delivery in an interactive style, and understand strategies to fairly and effectively assess learning.
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Brookfield (1990) describes competent teaching when:

Teachers’ words and actions are congruent . . . [and] when teachers respect learners by listening carefully to students’ expressions of concern, by taking care to create opportunities for students’ voices to be heard, and by being open to changing their practice as a result of students’ suggestions.

(pp. 163-164)

Organisation and Preparation.

It sounds like the teacher described in the next comment had read Brookfield’s work which led to this very positive student evaluation:

Best teaching methods, extremely kind and encouraging, pressure and stress free. He wants his students to do well! Always asks for their opinions. (B31)

It would be beneficial for colleges to promote the ‘best teaching methods’ that proved so effective for this student. I think it is safe to assume that this high quality of instruction could not have occurred without organisation and preparation, so that the student was able to experience a planned event upon entering the classroom. In fact, of the 300 interpreted

comments many students first referred to either the presence or absence of organisation and preparation in their classes, then went on to describe other teaching characteristics. Of these many comments, the following best illustrated the purpose of organisation and preparedness in the classroom:

He is extremely organized and knowledgeable; there is a lot of course info, but he finds a way to keep it all very interesting. (B11)

Typical college courses are comprehensive, intense, and time consuming. In this case the teacher managed the volume of information by organising the content. The underlying assumption is that he prepared each class to be conducted in a time effective manner and included a variety of delivery strategies to keep the course information interesting and on schedule. These strategies may have included pre-assigned self-study, in-class group work (collaborative study), lectures with a question and answer period, guest speakers to add new perspective, and other engaging activities.

On the other hand, the following student comment reported a lack of organisation that led to a shortfall in learning:

Disorganised and ill-prepared so we did not cover all the material we were supposed to cover. (A4)

If I were this student I would be greatly disappointed in the quality of delivery and not hesitate to report what I consider to be ineffective teaching. It would be interesting to learn how this teacher subsequently managed assessment of the course material knowing that instruction did not occur for all content areas. From this experience, it is easy to see how a domino effect can occur as a result of poor planning.

MacKeracher (1996) provides valuable first-hand endorsement for the value of organisation and preparedness:

I need to think carefully about what my future focused image of learning or learners is by engaging in preliminary planning. This type of [organisation and] planning is important. Most planning involves establishing learning objectives, designing facilitating activities, and setting up assessment procedures . . . planning is absolutely crucial to good facilitating even if you hope to make your facilitating strategies look spontaneous. (pp. 254-256)

Classroom interaction and lack of teaching experience.

It is fair to say that quality classroom interaction that connects dialogue and information, are critical elements of adult learning that competent teachers incorporate into their lessons (Kaufman, Guerra and Platt, 2005). The link between dialogue and information is noted by this next student who seemed impressed with the teacher's ability to interact. The teacher first delivered a quality lecture and then elaborated on the content for those who wanted further information:

Organised, clear lecture and tons more information to offer if you want to discuss any current issues with him. (A38)

Also worthy of mention are these students' reports on the benefit of peer dialogue and shared information as an interactive teaching strategy:

Peer reviews and debates made the class particularly fulfilling. (A23)

He dares to let students discuss debatable topics. (A60)

The logic behind this teacher's line of thinking is that engaging in interactive discussions and debates lead students to untested areas of learning. Critical adult educators believe that the students' ability to step out of their comfort zone where the teacher is 'the sage',

and enter into open dialogue with peers, leads to unanticipated and valuable learning especially in the areas of social issues.

In contrast to the open-minded interactive approach, lack of interaction is expressed by this student who was frustrated by a teacher who was so inexperienced that they may as well have taught themselves:

She didn't so much teach as turn the text book into slides and read them aloud. We may as well have taught the class to ourselves. It would have saved a lot of frustration because we wouldn't have had to deal with her ridiculously inexperienced approach. (A73)

This comment expresses several justifiable frustrations. Firstly, Janzow and Eison's (1990) study revealed that students understandably get annoyed with lectures that are only rehashes of reading assignments and:

Faculty is advised to explicitly incorporate course material into the larger framework of the students' lives, and to interpret rather than restate, textbook material during lectures. (p. 96)

Secondly, the students took great exception to the teacher's inexperience that was supported by another student comment:

He has no idea what he's doing up there. He seems like a deer caught in head lights. Sketchy teaching style and makes major mistakes on the board. Disappointed overall. (A18)

The students' dissatisfaction in both cases is focused on the teachers' inexperienced approaches that raise an important point regarding teacher training. As you know from earlier chapters, the informal student comments interpreted in this study were accessed from three Community College sites in British Columbia that offer a broad range of program and course offerings from vocational and trades training, to career training, to

university transfer studies, with an equally diverse population of instructors and students. As a result, since these Community Colleges were first opened in the late 1960's, administrators have faced the challenge of hiring course content-experts (e.g., Electricians, Nurses, and Academics) to teach, when most had little to no previous experience in classroom instruction. The Ministry responsible for post-secondary education at that time responded to this dilemma through the development of the *Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW)* that married industry experience to teaching experience. The workshops provided the basics of classroom management including preparing objectives, lesson planning, delivery methods, and assessment techniques.

Over the years, the ISWs led to the more involved *Provincial Instructor's Diploma* and the *Advanced Instructor's Diploma* that then fed into a Bachelor Degree Program in Adult Education. Over their careers, many college teachers in British Columbia have pursued graduate studies in education to further enhance their teaching abilities and understanding of adult learning while also maintaining essential professional affiliations within their specialties. Additionally, vocational, career, trades and technology instructors generally require continuing education in their respective specialties to remain licensed, which is a requirement of employment and teaching in these areas. Faculty development opportunities are offered as a benefit of employment to pursue this continuing education requirement. Not all university transfer instructors require continuing education or licensure however they also have the benefit of faculty development time. Many consider keeping current within their professional field an ethical responsibility although there are some who fall behind on these expectations and standards which ultimately reflects poorly on students in the classroom environment.

So, with all this described, the inexperienced teachers identified in the above comments could benefit from professional faculty development activities with a focus on classroom teaching. While we all have to courageously start our teaching careers somewhere, the novice teacher does have a professional responsibility to learn and practise the ‘art of teaching’, and realize that this is a lifetime endeavour. Knowledge, skills and values change over time and are often referred to as the ‘living curriculum’; successful teachers are flexible, adaptable, and willing to learn from students (Ramsden, 1992). This professional approach taken by dedicated teachers reaps great reward. For instance, hearing students acknowledge that ‘they have learned’ in a particular class is music to the ears of a dedicated teacher:

Excellent lecturer. Lectures were always organized and really interesting. Demo teaching was really fun, I learned the most in that class. (A43)

I believe there is nothing more rewarding and motivational for teachers to hear their adult learners express appreciation for quality instruction. From my twenty years in the college classroom, I greatly value knowing I have done my job well and that I have contributed to my students’ knowledge and career goals. Consequently, I am then driven to at least match if not exceed the quality of my teaching practice for the next cohort of students. From this I contend that the extrinsic acknowledgement from students provides significant intrinsic motivation for teachers. So, even though the roles of teacher and learner are different within the classroom, in our humanness we are all motivated by acknowledgement. In other words, the act of receiving acknowledgement [or positive reinforcement], tends to be more rewarding than the actual value of the reinforcement itself (Boshier, 1975). Teachers who are optimistic and acknowledge success motivate their students to learn, then their continued success reflects back to the teacher who then

motivates the students again and so the momentum continues. Hearing praise of teachers with this ability is inspiring from any source.

Assessment of learning.

Teaching competence as noted in the literature also relates to the ability to design assessment and feedback strategies that are fair and educationally sound (Ramsden, 1991). Having withstood the test of time, Deale's (1975) rationale to assess students is straight forward and a useful guide for teachers:

Assessment should be used to determine whether what has been taught has also been learned, how well it has been learned, and by how many; to monitor the progress of individual students as well as of groups; to evaluate instructional materials and procedures; to amass and retain accurate records of student attainment; and to aid learning. (cited in Lefrancois, 1991, pp. 389-390)

Assessment of learning is essential and findings from this study show that students are able to discern between effective and ineffective assessment strategies. They praised what they believed to be fair and beneficial assessment and to the contrary, also expressed their frustration with examinations that were either unrelated to content or that did not test knowledge to an acceptable level by using questions that, in their opinion, were either too simple or too complex. The issue of fair assessment was described by students in a realistic and evidentiary manner.

He stated up front that you needed to do the homework to pass. His exams were tough but were extremely well matched to what was taught. (A83)

I am impressed with the above student's admission that the exams, while 'tough' or challenging, did assess what had been taught which demonstrates his comprehension of 'fairness'. To the contrary, it must have been a real disappointment to students when they prepared for an examination based on class notes, only to discover that the content being examined was different:

She tries really hard, but she isn't clear on what she is teaching. You need to read the text book word for word. She teaches off of the notes on Power Point and the test is on something different. (A30)

Students may actually understand the material being tested, but the evaluation tool itself could be misleading if written in unfamiliar language. Students have every right to be perturbed by the unfair inconsistency described in the above report. Lefrancois (1991) puts the pressure on teachers to clean up their assessment processes with his contention:

Although classroom evaluation has a profound effect on what students learn, many teachers spend little time and effort in either developing good assessment procedures or attempting to ensure that what they test is really what they want students to learn. (p. 390)

Building on the sense of congruence and fairness, this next student acknowledges the 'great prof's' method of regular tutorials and tests that I assume would culminate to a final examination of content:

She was a great prof - extremely helpful and knowledgeable. Her weekly tests were very helpful to stay on top of the sections, and the weekly tutorials were perfect to clarify any issues with the lectures. (A80)

This concept of ongoing assessment throughout the course is endorsed by educators as being highly beneficial to adult learners. Evaluation needs to be used more often to provide students with constructive feedback about their performance. This feedback

should emphasize progress toward important educational goals and should occur in the course of learning, rather than only at the end of a unit (Crooks, 1988). Here is another important student comment addressing the need for progressive and constructive feedback:

She does not have an outline or syllabus for her teaching. She is very disorganized. She only gives checkmarks for feedback! She has no idea what she's doing; she lets the class out early and doesn't even know what the due dates are for her assignments. (B20)

Whether it is the teacher or the student who is being evaluated, more than a 'check-mark' for feedback is necessary to reinforce the teacher's effectiveness or the student's progress. Short, Stewin, and McCann (1991) state: "Providing students with accurate, constructive feedback has been clearly shown to improve both learning and performances at all ages, and measurement specialists regard this classroom evaluation as an indispensable part of the instructional process" (p. 402). I believe the same applies to teachers receiving feedback from their students, including that received informally from RMP online postings. I argue that if the shoe was on the other foot, so to speak, the process of student evaluation of teaching effectiveness would demand more than a checkmark to signify the quality of instruction or level of teaching competence, at least if the feedback from students were to be considered valid. I believe that 'one reaps what one sows' especially when it comes to two-way evaluation between teachers and adult students.

In the following reported case of unfair assessment, I question what could have led the teacher to request peer marking of a mid-term examination that was open to interpretation:

He was disorganized & not prepared for class. We had to mark our classmate's midterms, where the answers to questions are open to interpretation & we didn't get any marks back until the end of November. This class was a waste of time (A6)

The other messages embedded in this multi-faceted comment may give us a clue; it sounds like the teacher is not focused on the learning needs of the class including timely notification of grades. These fairness issues feed the earlier comments within the 'Competent' theme findings and are discussed further in Chapter Five.

According to this study's findings, derived from student reports of competent teaching, students believe that fundamental to their success is the teacher's: degree of organisation and preparedness, depth of topic knowledge, ability to facilitate effective class interaction, and fair assessment strategies that test to an appropriate and educationally sound level. The latent symbolism of the 'Competent' teaching characteristic theme indicates that students are seeking skilled teachers who are able to effectively and fairly manage classroom delivery strategies geared to adult learning and assessment.

*Please be a Content-expert –
We Need Your Expertise to Better Understand the Workplace*

<u>C</u>ONTENT-EXPERTS:	Teachers are current, informative, reality-based content experts with substantive experience in their topic areas that may include their academic research background, or their career background, or their trades-industry background.
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Although all six *ACCEPT* themes generated valuable findings, of particular interest in relation to the *college* setting is the emergence of 'content- expertise' as a valued teaching characteristic, especially considering the array of career and job training programs wherein reality or simulated learning is an important adjunct to curriculum

delivery. Mackeracher (1996) defines a content expert as “a representative of the body of knowledge being learned and by providing feedback about the aptness of proposed solutions or the logic of proposed concepts, theories and models” (p. 214).

Students recognized the high value of learning from content-experts when the classroom became a forum for the kind of discourse and the associated learning that characterize actual practice. Teachers who are content-experts can transfer workplace skills and knowledge to educate students in their future careers and vocations as reported within the following student comments:

One of the best and most reasonable professors with a lot of valuable academic and life experience. (C20)

He has prepared handouts and relates real life to what we are learning. He has a "real" daytime job in this career so knows what he is talking about! (A83)

I was struck by the first student’s respect for the teacher’s reasonable approach and acknowledgement of his or her life experience, both of which are important adjuncts to the teacher’s academic abilities. Similarly the second student was convinced that the ‘reality’ of the teacher’s daytime job provided vitality to content area. In both examples, concrete experience is supported by student participation in the actual experience (the content-expert brings the subject matter to life), that then generates insights and feelings from the student, that then gives opportunity to receive feedback related to personal learning needs and career goals. In such situations, the content-expert serves as a role model and relates to the students as a colleague instead of an authority (MacKeracher, 1996). I often receive positive acknowledgement from students who love to hear stories of my career experiences that might apply to them in their future careers. This approach

also exposes my authenticity, because I tell stories of what I learned from errors as well as from successes.

The following students' comments underscore the high value of content-expertise coupled with strong facilitation skills. I was touched by the attributions 'wonderful' and 'passionate' coming from students who benefited from the teachers' sincerity. Teachers who are role models in their areas of expertise allow students to envision their own possibilities for success. I have felt what I call the 'power of potential' when during my education, my mentors exhibited contagious energy in describing their chosen careers.

The content was complex, but she was patient and fair and has excellent knowledge of the content area. She was wonderful and supportive. (B79)

Passionate about his discipline and just wants his students to succeed in their future careers. (C25)

Students expressed disappointment in teachers who did not demonstrate content expertise or lacked interest in the course material:

He reads from the notes he gave us and usually doesn't have an answer to questions brought up "uhh I'm not really sure on that one. I'll have to look it up." (A77)

This first comment reveals two concerns. Firstly, it is safe to say that adult students do not appreciate being read to, especially if they have the notes in front of them and certainly, regardless of the environment, 'talking heads' put people to sleep. Secondly, the student was not impressed with the teacher's inability to respond to questions. In fairness, not every teacher is a walking encyclopedia of information, but the management of delaying a response is critical to the credibility of the teacher.

She was fun and enthusiastic. If ever she didn't know something she would go on a mission to find it and let you know the next day. (A28)

This second comment refers to a teacher who admitted that she did not have an immediate answer, but would let the student know once she did. As a teacher, I value personal opportunities to learn when asked obscure questions. I always immediately acknowledge the students insight and openly state that I will check and identify my resources to seek out an answer and suggest they do the same. In turn, I am acknowledged for my persistence and service to students. I firmly believe that effective teachers are also continual learners – to teach is to learn.

Students believe that the teacher’s ability to enthusiastically and accurately inform is fundamental to their future success, which will be further discussed in Chapter Five. The latent symbolism of the ‘Content-expert’ teaching characteristic theme indicates that students are seeking skilled mentors who can teach and effectively provide valuable insight to the “real world” of their chosen professions, careers and occupations.

Please be Empowering- - We Need You to Shift the Power

<u>E</u>MPOWERING:	Teachers empower students in their learning to build self-confidence and assertiveness. Teachers challenge, motivate, encourage and enable adult learners to think independently and critically.
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Teachers cannot simply hand over power to students but they can shift the power by providing enriching and stimulating environments, to enable self-reliance and empowerment through knowledge. From personal experience I know how exhilarating a class can be when the teacher’s sensitivity to learning needs morphs into a group of empowered students:

Exceptional professor! She makes class enjoyable and intellectual. This is a challenging course but she is understanding and gives extensions if

needed. She has high expectations but makes you want to work hard to better achieve. (A21)

To the contrary, Forsyth and McMillan (1991) provide insight to the impact of not empowering students:

Educators too frequently assume that students are reluctant learners, when in many cases, they become reluctant only after their initial intrinsic motivation is wiped away by hours of uninspired lectures in which instructors convey their own contempt for the subject matter. (p. 54)

Students are empowered when the teacher provides opportunities for them to build self-confidence:

I found her very challenging, getting me to think deeper about issues. (A39)

Similarly these two students experienced life-changing events through their teacher's ability to provide new direction and ways of thinking:

Such an awesome teacher, she changed my life! (B104)

She forever changed my view toward society, and the relationship between people. (C6)

To encourage students, the teacher needs to appropriately manage the environment, while also (1) facilitating an open and respectful interaction with students and, (2) by empowering versus over-powering. The empowering experiences described in the above student comments exemplify Kouzes and Posner's (2002) description:

Listen to how people feel when working with the leaders [teachers] they most admire: alive, valued, turned-on, enthusiastic, respected, significant, capable and proud. What do leaders [teachers] do to make us feel this way? They respect and listen to us, they support

and encourage us, they follow through on their commitments to us, they coach and mentor us, and they make us believe that we can make a difference. Leaders [Teachers] heed the voice within each of us that cries out for acknowledgment that we are neither invisible nor inconsequential . . . the paradox of power is that we become most powerful when we give our own power away. . . we get our power from the people we lead [teach]. (pp. 284-288)

The above quotation describes the means of generating productive power relations between teachers as leaders and students as self-regulated adult learners. This concept is discussed further in Chapter Five.

Students believe that the teacher's ability to empower is fundamental to their future success. The latent symbolism of the 'Empowering' teaching characteristic theme indicates that students are seeking teachers who are willing to shift the power in the teaching and learning process to the students to enable self-confidence and assertiveness.

Please be Perceptive - - We Need you to be Authentic and Credible

<u>P</u>ERCEPTIVE:	Teachers display a high level of authenticity and credibility including insight, intuition, and humour. Perceptive teachers care about the success of their students and are approachable.
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Authenticity and credibility.

Findings from the 'Perceptive' teaching characteristic theme show that students were able to discern between faculty who are naturally authentic and faculty who maintain a distant position. Also, students were attracted to credible teachers who were viewed as their trustworthy partners in learning.

Brookfield (1990) describes authenticity:

Evidence of authenticity includes the following behaviours: (1) teachers' words and actions are congruent; (2) teachers admit to error, acknowledge fallibility, and make mistakes in full view of learners; (3) teachers allow aspects of their personhood outside their role as teachers to be revealed to students; and (4) teachers respect learners by listening carefully to students' expressions of concern, by taking care to create opportunities for students' voices to be heard, and by being open to changing their practice as a result of students' suggestions. (pp. 163-164)

Authenticity is also defined by Cranton and Carusetta (2004) "Authenticity is the expression of the genuine self in the community wherein teachers in higher education come to know themselves and their preferences within the social context of their work" (p. 7).

Credibility is defined as the teachers' ability to present themselves as educators with something to offer students. Brookfield (1990) concludes "When teachers provide credibility, students see them as possessing a breadth of knowledge, depth of insight, and length of experience that far exceeds the students' own" (p. 163).

The following student comments reflect the strong preference for perceptive teachers who are authentic and credible. Students recognized teachers who are advocates and who displayed an ongoing intuition for what works and what doesn't work in classroom delivery. In contrast, students were painfully aware of teachers who lacked self-awareness and failed to focus on their classroom interactions, leading to a sense of

abandonment in their learning process. These student perceptions align with Levy et al. (1992) who contend that teachers' behaviours are an important feature of self-regulated learning typical of an adult education setting where students are expected to know or problem solve independently.

As provided earlier in this Chapter, the greatest number of attributions from the student comments generated the 'Perceptive' theme. From many choices, I have selected experiences related to the teachers' caring attitude, ability to inspire, humour, and approachability that I will explore in relation to teacher authenticity and credibility.

Caring attitudes.

The following comments show how students valued a teacher's caring attitude in relation to their academic success. The first student's experience speaks of a teacher who exhibited a caring attitude and who went 'far and beyond the call of duty' to assist, and in doing so, certainly establishes both her authenticity and credibility with students. I believe this is an excellent example of an effective teacher-student relationship, wherein the teacher is a facilitator of the overall classroom experience that led to the student 'truly learning a lot':

She is an excellent teacher, ready to help students in any way she can, understanding/empathetic/nice/fair marker and her clarity and style of teaching is far and beyond the call of duty! I have truly learned a lot from her. (A81)

The following student comments build on the concept of authenticity in that the teachers express interest in the students and are helpful. Here we see the term 'genuine' related to caring, showing that students do notice and appreciate teachers who display such

effective teaching characteristics. Both teachers also provide credibility by offering students their knowledge and by being interested in the topic:

What a genuine man...he cares about his students and is interested in what he teaches...one of the best teachers I have had in my entire school history. (B30)

He is a great professor, very knowledgeable and very helpful. He cares a lot about his students and it shows. (A31)

In contrast, the next comments reflect the detrimental effect on learning when students perceived an uncaring, impatient attitude from the teachers:

He did not have patience for the people who did not understand and he did not want to re-explain things so we could understand. (A26)

Knowing that not all adults learn at the same pace, perceptive teachers would intuitively honour student requests for review - - perhaps even before they were asked. This level of responsiveness illustrates the inter-connection of teaching attitudes, actions, and respect and is reminiscent of Brookfield's (1990) counsel that bears repeating "teachers respect learners by listening carefully to students' expressions of concern, by taking care to create opportunities for students' voices to be heard, and by being open to changing their practice as a result of students' suggestions" (pp. 163-164).

Students who do not experience authenticity and credibility from a caring teacher fear failure and being left in the dark with unanswered questions:

His class is nearly impossible to succeed in. Massive drop out and failure rate. Somehow he totally doesn't care if most of the class does poorly even when they try. (B50)

Often times it is unclear where, or why you've lost marks. Most times you will also regret asking him why. The lectures seem easy, but he never goes over answers to problems or tests in class which leaves you feeling in the dark. He doesn't care. (C79)

Additionally, students who are confused with course content may hesitate to seek assistance especially in the presence of an impatient teacher. Students may fear being perceived as incompetent to an authority figure or in some cultures, believe they are disrespecting the teacher by admitting their weakness. Feeling unable to ask for help is counter-productive to learning. Perhaps even worse is the humiliation of asking for help then being belittled or disempowered:

She laughed at my mistakes and said they were stupid! I was shocked. (A56)

She seems to enjoy cutting people down and does not connect with the class. Very long boring sessions. (C8)

Such responses from uncaring teachers are a ‘shock’ to the student’s self-worth especially in an educational setting where it should be safe to make and learn from mistakes such as that experienced by this student:

He made the course awesome with his own insights, however, he is by no means arrogant, he always lets the students talk first before he interjects and encourages a safe learning environment. (B106)

A different approach to understanding authenticity and credibility comes from this student who believes that the teacher is not in tune with students:

Not in tune with students and has not revised notes in a decade. Not interested in teaching or in seeing her students improve. (C48)

Obviously this teacher’s style is not aligned with the student’s learning needs. Not being ‘in tune’ is likely disconcerting for both the teacher and the student and would undoubtedly create classroom tension. It takes at least two to form a caring relationship and generally that arises from sharing some common ground. It could be that there is no common ground in this case especially if the teacher is reportedly disinterested in student success. It sounds like the teacher may have been ‘on fire’ a decade ago when she first

allegedly prepared the notes, and is now experiencing ‘burn out’ or a lack of interest in teaching. Generational differences might have motivated this student comment that reflects the student’s inability to relate effectively with the teacher and vice-versa. The teacher in this situation may benefit by attending a generational awareness workshop or by attending a *Great Teacher’s Seminar* to refresh his or her knowledge of effective teaching strategies.

Inspirational.

I was intrigued by the provocative use of the attribution ‘inspirational’ in several of the student comments, and wondered why inspirational was specifically chosen over other similar terms such as motivational or empowering, to describe teaching characteristics. My interpretive analysis of the student comments taught me about the subtle differences between these terms and how what these students experienced was truly distinguished as inspirational, for example:

He'll inspire you and motivate you to understand the course. (C16)

Marx and Winne (1991) speak about motivation in relation to inspiration and recognize that motivation is a critical component in teaching first, because it is viewed as a precursor to learning and second, because motivation attempts to address the need for inspiration so that:

Students will be inspired to learn outside classrooms, eager to be involved in social and community life, willing to accept challenges, ready to praise their successes, and able to accept failures. (p. 157)

The next student gives credit to his teacher for acknowledging his natural talent and for seeing something in him that he may have never discovered in himself. The teacher, perhaps even unknowingly, influenced the student by providing an inspiring stimulus:

He told me that my writing style made me a natural as a journalist, in 4 years I was a journalist writing national copy. All because he inspired me to follow that idea, when I never had even thought of it. Never had a better teacher . . . FULL STOP! (A46)

As both a teacher and adult learner, I was personally inspired by this student's comment that described perceptive and inspirational teaching characteristics. Who wouldn't want to take a class with this teacher?

He is a wonderful teacher. Very enthusiastic and genuinely interested in helping people succeed. Anyone who wants to do their best in school, and aim for the moon should definitely take this course! (B7)

The idea of 'aiming for the moon' is truly a wonderful metaphor for learning and educational accomplishment that would likely influence students' course selection choices. The value, benefit, and credibility of the informal online faculty rating system are promoted by such an inspiring description.

This student describes alternate teaching techniques that inspired students in their learning:

She is a fantastic instructor who is not afraid to break free of traditional formats and writing techniques to help students. She was incredibly inspirational. (A23)

It sounds like this teacher successfully aroused an interest in taking creative risks to promote new writing techniques. MacKeracher (1996) states that "learning requires the learner to be continuously open to new experiences . . . [that] are the sources of new information or ideas that could modify knowledge or meanings already developed" (p. 245). It would take an enthusiastic, authentic and credible teacher to inspire this type of

risk-taking in a student's learning process, and breaking free of tradition was effective in this case.

The ability to inspire students is a valued teaching characteristic that clearly impacts student success. Unfortunately, students also reported uninspired classroom experiences that seriously affected the learning environment and caused the teachers to lose credibility. The attribution 'boring' surfaced very frequently within the data and it is not surprising that students felt lost:

Class is boring, with scattered info. Everything is on power point and then posted online. People sleep in class and play video games on their lap top which is really distracting and the teacher doesn't even care. (B68)

We were lost. (B21)

It is very disturbing to hear these students' classroom experiences that resulted in their feeling deflated and under-stimulated as illustrated in the following comments:

I started this class with enthusiasm and ended it feeling quite deflated. Essay outlines were always the same and expectations were narrow minded. (B1)

Boring/non interactive lectures, doesn't listen to students, sort of in his own world when lecturing. (B81)

She's critical to the point that you think she is on a power trip . . . unfortunate as many people go to College hoping for a closer connection to the teachers. (B107)

Each of the above three comments inter-connect with the earlier discussion of the 'Articulate' and 'Competent' themes, but are largely indicative of insensitive teaching strategies. I was particularly struck by the third comment that reflected one student's lost hope for a closer connection to the teacher now that she was going to College. I have witnessed that precious 'first day of class' student energy and enthusiasm that could so easily be lost by ineffective teaching characteristics. A credible teacher would

understand the serious consequences resulting from lack of motivation in the classroom such as that reported in the above comments.

If I were an administrator reading these faculty ratings I would certainly question the teacher's status and qualifications. There may be legitimate reasons for such ineffective teaching characteristics that could be remedied with some attention, including a review of the teacher's overall workload that may be compromising classroom performance.

Humour and novelty in the classroom.

Closely related to the concept of caring and inspirational teaching were student reports of how 'humour in the classroom' led to positive learning experiences. Students consistently expressed a strong desire for humour, fun, and interaction to add novelty and enhancement to their learning experience. There is comparably little mention of this attribute (humour in the classroom) in the empirical research of effective teaching, although adult educators do speak of its values. Roy (2004) writes that "humour is often a sign of rebelliousness; laughter can defeat the fear of the unknown. Humour works as a metaphor for transformation . . . a communal response of sensuous solidarity as it implies common understanding with others . . . [and helps people] to cope with the situations of the world" (p. 59). I am impressed with those teachers who allow their authentic self to emerge with the confidence of adding humour and fun to their classroom interactions and I wonder how teachers who are not spontaneously humorous cope. Perhaps, smiles and pleasant tones would be helpful in these situations. While it may be difficult to make

others laugh, it may be more important to learn how to laugh at oneself, and again exhibit authenticity (Lefrancois, 1991). This student comment supports this contention:

I'm sure she's a nice person but she needs to lighten up and not be so serious !!! It's OK to have fun teaching. (B92)

I noticed that the student comments often connected the attributions of caring and knowledge to the enjoyment of the class. This combination is powerful and demonstrates both authenticity and credibility.

Shows interest in your work, cares about the success of his students. A lot of fun and extremely knowledgeable. (C46)

Hands down the best department instructor. She is fun, understands different learning styles and personalities, and is extremely easy to talk to. (A17)

The benefit of interactive learning discussed earlier within the ‘Competent’ findings, is integrated into the following comments that also reflect a variety of effective teaching characteristics:

Uses some humour and a lot of real examples to help illustrate concepts. Class is interactive and you will learn a lot. (C69)

OMG!!!! A very funky and entertaining teacher. His demos were really funny. I think his way of teaching is really helpful because the face to face interaction and writing flawlessly on the board is really effectual. (C14)

It also sounds like this student aligned humour with the teacher’s expressed passion and energy:

She has a great sense of humour and is passionate about her topic, she includes a variety of different media in her lectures... she is energetic and has made the class a lot of fun! (B35)

It is interesting to learn that some students’ attendance was actually motivated by the presence of humour in the classroom and their motivations are quite legitimate. In

fact, Fenker and Schutze (2009) report “novelty has practical implications for educators . . . [because] we remember things better in the context of novelty” (p. 47). These comments show the value and benefit of ‘fun’ in the classroom:

She makes learning fun! I actually didn't mind getting up at 7 a.m. to go to my 8:30 class. (A11)

Her class is fun! She makes every class memorable. Highly recommended. (C75)

While humour is deemed effective in the adult educational setting, students do recognize when the humour is insincere or inappropriate, such as reported in the following comments:

If you can, avoid this guy as he makes lame jokes and he can be cocky and weird. (B33)

He tries to keep you entertained with his Futurama/Simpsons clips but it just makes you want to leave class earlier. (C51)

Unfortunately, the impact of humourless classroom experiences were also reported by discouraged students. There were a number of comments related to classroom tension that was often linked to the teachers’ temperament and mood:

GET OUT!!! She does not know what she is doing. She is mean and will make you cry, yes even the guys. (A61)

She is a good instructor however she has no sense of humour, and can be very moody at times. (B66)

She seems like she is always in a bad mood and miserable. B85)

I believe post-secondary institutions are like living organisms that morph in a constant state of change. Administrators, faculty, staff and students are all human beings with basic social needs that are inconsistently met, if met at all. One does not need to view reality television or soap operas when the equivalent is experienced daily within the

educational environment. For some teachers it is difficult to separate professional and private roles and that occasionally transfers to the classroom:

We're off topic regularly, WE DO NOT CARE ABOUT YOUR GRANDSON OR YOUR DAUGHTER, so please shut up! (student's emphasis) (C17)

She took forever to mark things (she has a new-born blah, blah, blah). (A19)

When this tendency to transfer mood or personal distraction into the classroom becomes the norm, then intervention by administrators is necessary. Fortunately, human resource departments have included workplace related counselling within its employee benefit packages that may help to remedy misplaced displays of emotion and need. Although this concern is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to bear in mind the detrimental effects to the teacher-student relationship when such distractions occur.

Approachability.

Students frequently commented on the teachers' degree of approachability, that I interpreted as meaning either the willingness of the teacher to meet during pre-arranged office hours, or the timing and level of responsiveness to student inquiry. The literature points to the positive effects of student-faculty contact (Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Onwuegbuzie, et al., 2007) as reported in the following three comments:

She is very helpful during office hours and in class as well. (C89)

Freely gives of his own time for extra tutorials. (A62)

He makes you laugh and yet he gets his point across. He will stay late to answer any questions. (B70)

Interestingly, the teachers described in these reports are willing to go beyond the call of duty in their facilitative roles. On the one hand, this tactic is admirable as students are

assisted, yet on the other hand, it may be setting an unhealthy precedent for the teacher to be working extended hours. Students who know how to recognize willing perceptive teachers may take the offer for out of class assistance to the extreme and become too dependent on instant answers from the teacher. With today's technology we have adapted to instant answers and I believe students expect the same entitlement from their teachers.

As an example, several of my colleagues who teach the same students within a program of study, refuse to respond to e-mail in the evenings or weekends, while others keep the lines of communication open around the clock. Difficulties arise when the teachers who do not respond as frequently are deemed less student friendly, while those who do respond are perhaps more credible to students. That said, one could easily argue for both sides of this issue. The teachers who limit their contact with students are monitoring their work hours and keeping adult students independent, while those who are continually available are responding to student need. However, there is a fine line between the urgency of an instant response (e.g., a pressing clarification needed for an exam the next day) and the convenience of an instant response (e.g., the student happens to be working on a project over the weekend or evening and the time is right *for them* to ask questions). In the latter case, especially in today's fast-paced society and with students also having to balance their study time with other responsibilities such as employment, it may be more student-centered for teachers to be as responsive as possible. It seems that the teacher described in the following comment took the middle ground and encouraged contact, but responded in her own time:

She encourages students to email her with questions about the tests and assignments, however it sometimes takes her a long time to answer. (A57)

Administrators may be wise to factor the timing needs of student life-styles into the teachers' workload equation, after all, Osborne (1991) reminds us that "Teachers are the primary learning resource for the guidance of student learning" (p. 284).

Super-helpful, and very reasonable about any requests. No question is too stupid; no time is a bad time...awesome! (A16)

Ask questions he's totally willing to answer and help out if you need it. If you do still not understand book an office hour it helps!! (B39)

Approachable, encouraging, and a fair marker. (C74)

Approachable teachers were mentioned numerous times throughout the data and, as the above examples have shown, were perceived as helpful and encouraging.

However, there was strong admonition from students who remarked on teachers who did not make themselves available for student inquiry and who appeared unapproachable:

Rather unapproachable, a very inconsistent marker, and spent FAR too much time away from class. (B88)

She lacked initiative to really sit down with you on a one to one basis. Whenever I approached her, she often just talked very quickly and off she went. (B91)

He told me that he did not appreciate me asking questions about class assignments. He would often go over class time and think it was rude that we questioned him about it. Overall, I lost respect for this teacher after having a full blown argument with him. He is very vague. (A91)

Not really very helpful and sometimes it looks like she's going to lose it when someone asks a legitimate question or wants clarification. Just don't get on her bad side and don't interrupt her lectures by asking questions. Just study the book on your own. (B49)

It sounds like the above students felt criticized and disturbed by the teachers' responses.

This generalized lack of respect would likely affect the students' sense of self confidence

and empowerment, and undoubtedly generate a stressful distraction from learning. These concepts are discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

The latent symbolism of the ‘Perceptive’ teaching characteristic theme indicates that students are seeking approachable teachers who care about academic success, and who inspire and add humour and enthusiasm to their classes.

As the findings from the ‘Perceptive’ theme revealed, students are able to sense the presence of authenticity and credibility. When these elements are absent from the classroom experience, students may exhibit a disturbing level of mistrust. It is apparent that teachers must make the effort to act authentically and build credibility or potentially do more harm than good (Brookfield, 1990).

Please be Trustworthy - - We Need Trust to Succeed

<u>T</u>RUSTWORTHY:	Teachers are aware of their professional, ethical and moral obligations in relation to the trust relationship of teaching. Teachers are respectful in thought and reliable in action and have earned the students’ confidence.
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I believe it is essential for college teachers to be trustworthy and remain consistent in word and deed, to treat adult learners ethically with respect and dignity, and to be natural partners in education.

The embedded messages from the student comments represented in the ‘Trustworthy’ theme reflected a wide range of emotion, from joy to outrage. Those students who experienced trustworthy, professional teaching evaluated positively and enthusiastically. Here are only a few of many strong testimonials of professional teaching behaviours:

Easily one of the best instructors in the faculty. She makes learning easy, fun and interesting. She treats people with respect and has more professional knowledge than most will ever have. (A37)

She is an absolute pleasure to work with. She really loves what she's doing and it is obvious by her commitment to her students and her enthusiasm in the classroom. (A76)

He is a really nice teacher. He is also very fair and treats everyone equally. I really enjoyed being in his class. (B37)

She is very friendly and patient. She appears as a passionate and professional teacher. Well-organized and well-prepared. I like her teaching style. I will never forget her. (B67)

Sadly, in contrast there were many students who experienced untrustworthy behaviours and who were distracted and angry in their comments. To have a sense of how frequently this unfavourable phenomenon occurs, I interviewed college counselors and Ombuds who work with frustrated students on grade appeals or who listen to complaints about poor quality instruction. The Ombuds office of one College site represented in this study reported close to 500 complaints within one academic year. Areas of concern included: academic standards; policy or procedural issues; discrimination; funding/financial issues (when classes were dropped due to poor instruction); and traumatic stress from inappropriate classroom experiences. Without doubt, broken trust through unethical behaviours yields a negative influence on the academic and intellectual development of undergraduate students (Braxton, et al., 2001).

For the purpose of framing the findings related to the absent or ineffective teaching characteristics drawn from the 'Trustworthy' theme, I have interwoven student comments with Braxton and Bayer's (1999) "empirically derived normative structure of seven inviolable behavioural patterns that guide faculty teaching role performance" (p.102). It is important to note that these seven normative orientations: (1) safeguard the

welfare of students as clients (with the exception of uncooperative cynicism); and (2) according to faculty, should be severely sanctioned (Braxton & Bayer, 1999). To draw attention to such damaging teaching practice, I have intentionally provided multiple comments that bear witness to the inviolable teaching behaviours. It is disappointing that there were so many from which to select and that each of the three college sites within the study were represented with reports of unethical behaviours:

1. Condescending negativism occurs when a faculty member publicly demeans students, such as making condescending remarks to a student in class, expressing impatience with a slow learner in class, or criticizing the academic performance of a student in front of other students. (Braxton & Bayer, 1999, p. 102)

I found he did not have patience for the people who did not understand and didn't want to re explain things to us so we could understand. (A26).

In his feedback he openly mocked students. (B2)

Dean please get rid of this guy, he makes the College a worse place. He might know his stuff... might, but he can't communicate at all. Worst of all, his marking and treatment of students is incredibly unethical. He sometimes publicly embarrasses people in class. (A84)

He yells at you for trying to borrow his notes during break. Nice to Caucasian people but really mean to Asians. His classes are pretty boring. Notes won't get you anywhere. Reading the textbook is more helpful. (B99)

He's rude to students. Unbelievably insensitive instructor, department should seriously consider firing him. (C23)

BAD TEACHER, DON'T TAKE HER COURSE, SHE IS SO MEAN, UNFAIR, NEGATIVE AND DISCRIMINATES. (Student's emphasis). (B16)

He will embarrass you if you make a mistake. (B14)

She laughs at my mistakes and said they were stupid! (A56)

2. Inattentive planning includes the failure to have textbooks and other course materials available in time for the course and not preparing a course outline or syllabus for students. (Braxton & Bayer, 1999, p. 102)

She does not have an outline or syllabus for her teaching. She is very unorganized, boring and lazy. (B20)

She does not follow the curriculum and is hard to follow in class. (A67)

3. Moral turpitude includes sexual relations or suggestive sexual comments to one's undergraduate students and attending class while intoxicated. (Braxton & Bayer, 1999, p. 102)

Everyone has a right to their own politics but his were offensive, narrow-minded and ignorant, indicative of a privileged white man with a sheltered academic existence. In my opinion, the wrong type of person to be teaching, sexually inappropriate comments, and xenophobic views on Asian overpopulation made me decide to drop this course. (C47)

He gave us an overview of how his stocks are doing every class. Then we had some political discussions and he would joke about the strip club, especially the one beside the College. We talked about every thing except the course topic until the end when he would go over some course material. His lectures and his hand writing were terrible. (B41)

4. Particularistic grading involves uneven or preferential treatment of students based on personal characteristic, rather than on meritorious academic performance, and deviations from stated graded policies that are intentionally not communicated to all students. (Braxton & Bayer, 1999, p. 102)

He is a fear marker to some students and fair marker to some students. When he likes someone he gives him/her marks in fair way. He is the worst teacher I have ever had in this subject!!! (C3)

He misunderstands the point of teaching. Instead of transferring his knowledge to you and facilitating your learning he talks his highly academic talk and revels in the few (mostly male students) who actually

follow him. If you want to learn and work with a prof who actually cares if the majority of his students understand him, then SKIP HIM! (A82)

Terrible teacher! She abuses her power to an extreme. If she doesn't like you, she'll give you a really hard time. Good luck if you have her, because you are really going to need it. (B65)

5. Personal disregard involves such behaviours as being routinely late for one's classes, being unprepared for class, and frequently using offensive profanity.

(Braxton & Bayer, 1999, p. 102)

She was always at least 15 minutes late for every class. (A3)

Lazy, answers his cell phone while teaching class, is late for class regularly, and doesn't teach much. (A20)

Don't expect him to show up for labs except for the first five minutes. (A68)

He likes to sleep during labs and played games on his laptop instead of answering questions from the students during a review class. (A86)

She lets the class out early and doesn't even know what the due dates are for her assignments. (B20)

She is unclear about assignments, often missed class, and she is inconsistent in what she tells her students. Avoid her at all costs if possible, she's too frustrating to deal with. (C43)

6. Uncommunicated course details occur when a faculty member fails to inform students about important course policies or makes changes in the class time and location without informing the students in advance. (Braxton & Bayer, 1999, p. 102)

He changed the lab structure of the course halfway through the semester and we did not cover all the material we were supposed to cover. Stay away if you can. (A4)

Very hypocritical and unsure of marking criteria set out before projects are due. Doesn't follow through with her standards and doesn't make the criteria clear for students. (A9)

He forgot to give the class a major assignment so we only had one week to complete it. (C21).

7. Uncooperative cynicism describes a cynical attitude toward teaching and the refusal to participate in departmental matters pertaining to the teaching role, such as participating in curricular planning. (Braxton & Bayer, 1999, p. 102)

Not in tune with students. Has not revised notes in a decade. Not interested in teaching or seeing her students improve. (C48)

Too busy with other things to pay attention to students. (C62)

The above may be the comments of students who are in transition from the often nurturing K-12 public school environment, or who are returning to college after the relative independence of the workplace and therefore are simply not expecting rude, blunt, power-orientated behaviours from some teachers. However, no matter what their age or disposition, the student reports of poor teaching conduct are justified. I fully agree with students who are critical of such disturbing and untrustworthy displays from teachers, who in effect, are 'breaching the contract' of ethical conduct and exhibiting power-over strategies (discussed in Chapter Two) that seriously impact learning. Some teachers caught in this position may challenge these student comments, believing that the students were exaggerating and merely venting their anger. Even if this were true, it would still behove the involved teacher, as a professional, to fully investigate the students' concerns. If teaching practices are not at fault, then educators must still question how the at-risk student could receive assistance. I expand on the trustworthiness discussion in Chapter Five by examining the detrimental effects on students due to

unethical teaching behaviours and the value of the anonymous online faculty rating system (RMP) to disclose untrustworthy practice.

As mentioned earlier, the students' multi-faceted messages were rich in their expression and very worthy of further problematisation. With that goal in mind, I will continue to unravel the more complex student comments in the next Chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

At first glance, findings related to each of the *ACCEPT* themes appeared quite logical based on the students' phenomenological classroom experiences. Students know what they felt and what they did or did not learn that prompted them to access RMP. It was clear that many comments were credible and aligned with what researchers have identified as effective teaching characteristics. Other comments however were problematic and more complex than they first appeared, requiring a more critical and thoughtful analysis through the lens of adult education. Reports on both the presence and the absence of effective teaching characteristics add to our understanding of teaching practice and its challenging relationship to learning.

Articulate Teaching Characteristic

Inarticulate versus Unfamiliar?

As revealed in the 'Articulate' teaching characteristic findings, some students may report that the teacher's instruction is inarticulate. I contend that this confusion or lack of clarity, and the resulting emotions students experience, could instead be a result of unfamiliar teaching strategies and discourse. MacKeracher (1996) summarizes the sources of emotions, such as student distress and classroom anxiety:

Learning is much affected by emotions from three sources: those we bring to the learning process, those which are generated during the learning

process, and those which we feel when we receive feedback about whether we have succeeded or failed. (p. 63)

For some students the college classroom may be like stepping into a foreign country hearing new language for the first time and experiencing different cultural approaches. It is possible that these students are distressed due to their lack of familiarity with college expectations. Perhaps they have not been in a classroom for years and feel out of touch with education and assessment or are used to the high-school setting that may have been more nurturing. Then again, maybe the teacher is actually inarticulate, which would likely frustrate even the most confident students.

Fear of embarrassment and failure generates distress that inevitably interferes with adult learning. Students may be subjected to additional stress if their weaknesses (or lack of understanding) are on public display, especially in the evaluative stages of the course. Fenwick and Parsons (2000) describe the dilemma of evaluating other adults:

Adults have rather fragile egos. We protect our self-esteem and tend to instinctively respond to criticism by being defensive. Protective walls go up with what we feel attacks our sense of self and our feeling of control. Most adults believe they are competent. We pose our own problems and learn to deal with messes and mistakes as best we can. Most of all we learn to trust ourselves as the most reliable judges of what is worthwhile and what isn't. This includes judging our own worth. (p. 25)

I believe that teachers need to factor the above characteristics of adult learners into the learning equation or risk losing student confidence. Effective teachers are articulate, knowing that student perceptions of teaching behaviour are strongly related to

appreciation [and understanding] of learning tasks (Wigfield, et al., 1998; Wenzel, 1998).

Here are comments from students expressing their anxieties over ‘unsafe’ learning environments where the consequences of failure due to inarticulate instruction were disconcerting:

He gets frustrated when people put up their hand when they don’t understand him and he makes it hard for them after that. He made me cry in class one day. (B87)

In the end, no one even wanted to express an opinion and were afraid of being embarrassed. (C86)

Some teachers may expect adults to be critical thinkers who can withstand experiences such as those described above, and then readily self-identify their learning needs and seek guidance accordingly. This level of learning maturity may be possible for adults in supportive classroom situations, but would be difficult when the teacher is inconsistent, unresponsive, or responds in an increasingly confusing manner:

Ask him a question and his reply will confuse you even more. (C50)

Very hypocritical and unsure of marking criteria set out before the projects are due. Doesn’t follow through with her standards and doesn’t make the criteria clear for students. (A9)

As the researcher, I have no reason to doubt the validity of the student comments from their phenomenological perspectives. Their comments reflect their truths. It is apparent that teacher communication styles strongly influence student outcomes and satisfaction with instruction (Brekelmans, et al., 1989).

I agree with Coutu, (2002) who contends that organisations [e.g.: educational institutions] “must find a method to deal with the [distress and] anxiety adults experience when they are forced to “unlearn” what they know and learn something new” (p. 106).

Depending on their adopted adult learning philosophies, described below, teachers will likely have varied approaches to assisting distressed students who are unfamiliar with the college environment. These varied approaches may or may not be effective for potentially defensive and distressed students. Failure to ‘connect and correct’ may lead these students to further distress.

An educator with a humanist view of teaching and learning may deal with student distress by providing a safe, supportive classroom atmosphere conducive to personal growth, and by facilitating adult students in a non-authoritarian manner (Cranton, 1992).

An educator with a behaviourist view may believe that students need to just get over their anxieties and deal with the ‘real world’ complexities of the college environment that generates learning in and of itself. These educators may be more inclined toward the product of learning, rather than how the learning is occurring (Cranton, 1992).

Educators who align with critical social theorists may follow the influence of Paulo Freire and to alleviate student stress and anxiety, might advocate for changing the power-relationship within a classroom. The teacher in this situation is no longer considered the source of knowledge, authority and power, and instead becomes a learner with the students whose past experience and knowledge is then respectfully represented in the classroom (Cranton, 1992).

Feminist pedagogy might affect the distressed student through the teacher’s ways of knowing and learning based on process and collaboration, recognizing the relational aspects of human experience (Cranton, 1992). Building a productive relationship with the anxious student would include the teacher’s caring attitude, sense of equality (adult to

adult) and ability to understand the student's point of view - - in other words, exhibiting perceptive teaching characteristics.

Teachers who understand transformative learning theory and believe that meanings of ideas exist within the person, may encourage constructivism or 'making meaning' of the anxiety producing experience to then understand what guides the student's future thoughts, feelings and actions. The teacher may foster critical self-reflection to help anxious adult learners (Mezirow, 1991).

Interestingly, this self-reflection may also occur through informal communication, such as the classroom equivalent of water-cooler talk, or via computer mediated communication such as RMP. The freedom for a student to voice concerns to peers anonymously and without repercussion may provoke important personal insights. Also, reading online postings from peers may serve to allay fears; especially if the student ceases to feel alone in their perceptions. On the other hand, if the distressed student is simply seeking a place to vent such as shown below, then the online process would not be as constructive:

No sense of humour. . .no respect to students. . .quizzes are stupid and marking is unfair. . . and overall this teacher is very boring. . .talks the whole class and nothing else. . . GRADE F. . .don't ever get this teacher, he is terrible and he's a #\$\$%@. . . I wish I could write that word but I can't. (A59)*

There are many perspectives on how individual educators may approach distressed and anxious students; however if mismatched, there may be limited success in reducing the tension. This ongoing frustration could be what dissatisfied students refer to in their online comments. Students are experiencing their personal reality and that is sometimes difficult for teachers to disarm.

Perhaps students would be less anxious if educators consider the first of Knowles' (1984) principles of adult learning whereby "adults have the need to know why they are learning something" (p. 43). I contend that an articulate teacher would readily provide this information early in the lesson as a clear, motivational bridge to learning and set the stage for a trusting relationship, which may not have occurred in the following scenario:

Endless hours spent figuring out what to do in labs because we learn nothing in class. Online notes are just lists of commands with unclear expectations. In case you think this is the tirade of a bitter student doing poorly, it's not. The majority of the class is furious on a daily basis. (A42)

Regardless of the cause, student distress and anxiety experienced in the classroom is not remedied by inarticulate instruction or confusing information, although it does take at least two people to communicate when concerns arise. From my teaching perspective, I have had occasion to wonder how in-class information, announced clearly on three different occasions, could possibly fail to reach the entire class. I suppose that certain students could have been 'absent in that moment' and simply not have heard the instruction, so later became anxious due to their lack of understanding. Does this mean that I could be labeled as an 'inarticulate' teacher by a student who simply was not paying attention? In fairness, I would hope not, but this very situation does reduce the credibility of some online comments regarding inarticulate instruction. While I do not coddle adult students, I do find it necessary to communicate my messages verbally, online, and by hard-copy bulletin board postings to keep instruction running smoothly and reduce student anxiety. While college students should exhibit a reasoned level of responsibility in managing stress (other than the stress needed to learn), it still seems

logical for a competent teacher to anticipate the potential causes of anxiety for some students before they occur, especially in larger sized classes.

Competent Teaching Characteristic

The latent symbolism underlying the ‘competent’ teaching characteristic theme indicates that students are seeking skilled teachers who are able to effectively and fairly manage classroom delivery strategies geared to adult learning and assessment. Who could argue the benefits of a well orchestrated inter-active class, with efficient use of time and fair, effective assessment?

Inter-active Opportunities and Power Relations

Competent teachers know that inter-active aspects of learning can occur in a variety of ways including learner to self, learner to facilitator, learner to other learners, and learner to learning resources, which opens the door to many delivery and assessment options (Boehrer & Linsky, 1990). The following student comments support this contention:

Gives great advice and spurs a lot of useful discussions. (B58)

Allows for discussion and student participation; really interesting topics - relevant and current. (C61)

Adult learners perceive, process, and are motivated to retain new information based on their individual learning styles, past experiences, beliefs, useful discussion and participation as reported in the above comments. When inter-active opportunities are not experienced and differing insights are not shared, some learners become passive and somewhat powerless observers who leave the teacher in control. Fenwick and Parsons

(2000) state that “people actively make meanings of their own from all experiences including formal education . . . and all people construct knowledge differently” (p. 73). From this, it is understandable that student participation and discussion allow an interchange of ideas to illuminate concepts and address various learning styles that may not occur when students only hear the teacher’s perspective and do not otherwise engage in the topic. Adult learners need to ground what they learn in their own language and experience. Interaction with others helps to achieve that need. MacKeracher (1996) offers additional perspective on the same concept:

Effective interactions are not based on some altruistic process in which one ‘gives’ equality, control and power to the other. Rather, both must assume that the other is capable of exercising equality, control and power while at the same time ensuring that both time and space are shared equitably”. (p. 232)

The value of inter-active aspects of learning, when the teacher releases control and power, brings to mind my Chapter Two discussion of Foucault’s (1994) analysis of power relations:

It is necessary to distinguish ‘power relations’, as having a specific nature including two indispensable elements: (1) an active other, or subject, who is free to act - - not that this implies consent- - because it is only in the subject’s actions that one can observe one’s power over the subject; and (2) the open field of possibilities or range of ways in which the subject can act (including resistance) . . . the exercise of power is a ‘conduct of conducts’ and a management of possibilities. (p. 138)

Brookfield (2001) states “Foucault’s analysis of power has direct implications for common practices found in institutionally sponsored, formal programs of adult education (p. 22) . . . power flows around the body politic and around the adult classroom, rather than being located at one clearly discernable point” (p. 7). This concept is further substantiated by Johnson, Bailey & Cervero (1998) who state “in traditional academic settings, it is assumed that the professor has the ability to control and shape the environment more than any other single person” (p. 394). This role must not be taken lightly.

In other words, I cannot *give* power to students, as though it were tangible, but I can offer active and empathic listening to set up the classroom environment, and then use facilitating activities which can help *shift* power toward adult students in their learning process.

For example, effectively facilitating student participation is one teaching strategy that shifts the power and provides the opportunity for students to learn from one another through their insights, to engage with each other and each other’s ideas, and to reflect on and refine what they hear. I fully agree with Boehrer and Linsky (1990) who describe the value of student participation “[students] can advance the discussion without having to outsmart each other and in the process of collective inquiry, the product of the class as a whole improves and the learning of each member increases” (p. 48). Time and again during group interactions I have felt the synergy of students engaging with each other and experienced their enhanced power first hand.

Guide by the Side or Sage on the Stage?

I believe skilled, effective teachers establish a balance of ‘guide by the side versus sage on the stage’ roles in the teaching and learning environment. These teachers adapt to the changing needs of students and realize that being overly organized or spoon feeding information can limit self-regulated adult learning and the sense of self-discovery. Research indicates that the differential effects of learning environment variables on student self-regulated learning have important consequences for instructional design and those teachers who are ‘coaches of students’ are perceived to facilitate the supportive learning process (van Grinsven & Tillema, 2006). Information that is ‘spoon-fed’ to students can clearly restrict effective problem solving or critical thinking skills (necessary for the workplace) and is too reminiscent of the K-12 curriculum. Certainly, the “tell me only what I need to know” student attitude is far too limiting for college level learning. As an example of this concept, students who ask *specifically* what they need to know for an examination should be referred to the examination blueprint or study guide that should show topic weighting in general terms. Although the message from the student in the below comment sounds positive from their perspective, the teacher may have been overly specific.

He never tests you on stuff he hasn't taught you, and he tells you exactly what to expect. (A87)

Being too specific might ‘place a ceiling on student learning’ by qualifying the importance of one area of examined content over another. For example, just because some content has not been ‘taught’ in class, such as the content from reading assignments, it does not mean that it should not be examined. The counter-point to this

approach is that ‘lifting the ceiling on learning’ takes considerable time that is usually not available to adult students either in or out of class, so on occasion perhaps a greater degree of specificity is necessary, especially for a competency based program of study. I agree with Weber and Berthoin (2003) who contend that "time pressure can both accelerate and slow down learning processes . . . and is experienced as motivating or threatening . . . if the sense of threat becomes too excessive, however, learning can be slowed or made impossible altogether" (p. 355). From this concern, I add that when time constraints exist, ‘nice to know’ learning and ‘must know’ learning should be considered in the lesson planning to avoid information overload. Also, balancing assignment and examination due dates across the semester will reduce threat and protect the pace of learning. These simple adjustments will also support time management strategies related to self-regulated learning. Here are several student comments to substantiate the concept of either motivating or threatening the learning process:

An easy class if you keep up with the pace. (C27)

She rushes you through the class and often cancels classes so you are on your own for some content. When I said she goes fast I mean really fast like there's no time to stop and explain the details. Too much pressure for me and I didn't learn much. (C49)

At first I liked the class, but he tried to stuff too much into a short period of time. (C56)

Notes are helpful but way too much information and in depth for a 1st year course . . . stay away. (A89)

Wrote too many time-consuming essays as if his was our only class. (C13)

He forgot to give the class a major assignment so that we only had one week to complete it. (C21)

Time is Money

The students' online anecdotes repeatedly indicated that they can't afford to waste their time and money on courses that are ill-prepared and disorganized as illustrated in the following examples:

Just terrible . . . waste of money, time and energy! He did not attend one full class the entire semester. He should learn the topic himself before trying to teach it. (B5)

I can't believe I paid money for this. Makes no sense. Painful. (B29)

She didn't so much teach as turn the text book into slides and read them aloud. We may as well have taught the class to ourselves and saved the time and money. (A73)

Furthermore, in this competitive world, students expressed concerns about their grade point average dropping as a result of what they perceived to be incompetent teaching:

His teaching style is bad . . . as he said in the first class, most of the students would fail the first midterm. (A47)

This professor is incredibly vague and will not explain himself or his instruction. Do not take this class unless you want your GPA to drop. (B61)

Fair is Fair, or is it?

D'Appollonia & Abrami (1997) conclude that student motivation, course level, instructor's grading leniency [fair assessment], and instructor's expressivity may bias *formal* student ratings of instructors. It is not yet determined if this is also true with *informal* student ratings of instructors.

For example, fair assessment could be ‘in the eyes of the beholder’ as students may have worked hard on an assignment or examination, expected a reasonable grade, but failed the criteria, while others worked hard, understood the criteria, and achieved success. The disappointed students may in defense blame the teacher for being unfair or for not providing clear instruction that may have otherwise led to their success, as portrayed below:

He did not have patience for the people who did not understand . . . I got 0/50 on his huge assignment even though I spent well over 20 hours on it. (A26)

Often times it is unclear where, or why you’ve lost marks. Most times you will also regret asking him why. (C79)

The teacher’s management in these cases may allow students a chance for a re-write or may unsympathetically ignore the students’ distress. The teacher’s choice of action in these situations exemplify and interconnect the *ACCEPT* themes of perceptive and trustworthy (discussed in the upcoming sections). The failed student, who put in the effort for the ‘huge assignment’, is bound to feel ‘ripped off’ and that frustration is likely to reflect in his or her online commentary on unfair marking. I wonder how this particular student resolved the situation.

On the one hand, Osborne (1991) reminds us that “students will learn better if allowed to experience the consequences of their own choices . . . [and] most of us can remember failures from which we have extracted significant learning” (p. 284). On the other hand, although one can only speculate, perhaps the teacher provided support to the student as described by other students in the following examples:

If you mess up on an assignment she’ll let you re-do it. She is extremely fair and I strongly recommend her as a teacher. (A11)

This course is tough! But he makes a lot of accommodations to help students raise their grades. (A47)

I failed my midterm, but he told me never to lose hope, so with his help I passed the course (B31)

I remember she spent 45 minutes helping me to edit my essay after it had been marked - - no teacher has ever done that and I learned a lot. (B98)

Work is intensive and she is very helpful in and out of class. She will point you in the right direction when you get lost. (C76)

To complicate the issue of fairness in marking, the individual grading criteria for examinations and assignments sometimes varies from class to class. Interestingly, if students start to compare “too easy” to “too difficult” they may discover that the more difficult assessments provide greater retention of transferable knowledge into future contexts. After taking a difficult course with a teacher they did not like, students reported that after all is said and done, they had learned and retained more information. For example:

Some conventions he makes you follow are arbitrary, but mostly he will teach you GOOD study habits that you won't learn elsewhere. You will be thankful later (C38).

In contrast, these students are deeply concerned about fairness and the level of course difficulty assigned and implemented by teachers:

After 9 semesters of College I got my first F (could not withdraw). Never had below an A in this subject before. Now I am repeating, avoid him if you can. (C57)

Our class average is 42%. He is hard, really hard. (C83)

In the same context, the following student remark indicates the difficulty students experience when an introductory course is assessed at an advanced or unrealistic level.

Very hard marker. Marks first year papers as if they were 4th or 5th year papers. She is not helpful at all. (A54)

The teacher in this reported scenario may need to classify her assessment in relation to the levels of the cognitive processes appropriate to the students' level of knowledge. Although somewhat limited, Bloom's 1959 taxonomy that describes how learners develop their understanding of a concept, would be a helpful starting point. The teacher may discover that her assignment or examination expectations cluster at the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy to include analysis, synthesis, or evaluation that would also require understanding of the lower levels including knowledge, comprehension, and application.

To add my perspective, this teacher's expectation of the level of understanding may be unrealistic for some first year students. I understand that the range of marks granted are often determined by the various abilities of students to go beyond the lower levels of understanding to higher order cognitive skills. However, I also understand how some students would consider the marking to be unfair. If an assignment or examination is designed to exceed first year level comprehension, then perhaps the pre-requisite knowledge for that course should be reviewed and adjusted accordingly.

Research shows that mutual, reciprocal and collaborative learning environments that are supportive encourage knowledge retention and sustainability (Edmonds, Lowe, Murray & Seymour, 2002). Also, D'Apollonia, Abrami, and Rosenfield (1993) conclude that General Instructional Skill, with three sub-skills: delivering instruction, facilitating interactions, and evaluating student learning were global components of teaching effectiveness. These two studies substantiate the most fundamental teaching expectations that align closely with the online student commentary. It is therefore understandable that

aware students would be very concerned when they find themselves in courses that fail to meet professional standards with teachers who lack credibility.

Authentic and Credible versus Incompetent?

Brookfield (1990) describes credibility as the “teachers’ ability to present themselves as people with something to offer students. When teachers provide this credibility, students see them as possessing a breadth of knowledge, depth of insight, and length of experience that far exceeds the students’ own” (p. 163). Based on the findings of this study regarding competent teachers, students appear to agree whole-heartedly.

As I studied the student comments that related most to competent teaching characteristics I was either elated or deflated. On the one hand, I acknowledge teachers who deserve the praise from student evaluative comments, as their teaching practice appears educationally credible and sound. On the other hand, as described in the following comment, I am concerned that students’ learning is disrupted and frustrated by ineffective strategies orchestrated by teachers who claim to be qualified to teach in adult education settings.

I loved the course content and tried to participate, but withdrew because of her teaching style. She is not open-minded to other views or opinions; it's her way or no way. Not encouraging of independent thought or analysis, she's right, you're wrong. It's too bad, I was really interested in the topic. I wouldn't recommend her under any circumstances. (C55).

It has been my experience that adult students learn most productively when the teaching style aligns with the students’ preferred learning style and their ability to self-regulate. From this I believe the most competent teachers are first authentically concerned about their students’ needs, goals and learning styles, and that they adjust their

teaching strategies accordingly. Adult students' needs may indeed alter over the duration of a course, especially as they either gain confidence in or need assistance with the course content. Contrary to self-directed learning theory, many adults require ongoing direction from the teacher to identify learning needs (Brookfield, 1986).

The next comment emphasizes how the teacher finds ways to maximize her students learning that results in a deeper thought process while maintaining a relationship conducive to learning:

She is one of the best teachers I've ever had. She cares about the education of her students, and clearly tries hard to find ways to teach that maximizes her students learning. I found her very challenging, getting you to think deeper about issues, but also down-to-earth, like a friend. Highly recommended! (A39)

It is important for students to feel supported by an articulate, competent teacher, who also is a content-expert capable of adding depth to the curriculum with their 'insider' knowledge.

Content-expert Teaching Characteristic

Who are They to Judge?

Some teachers may question if adult students, who are 'topic novices', are actually in a position to critique the level of expertise exhibited by the teacher. How would a novice know enough about a specific topic area to judge a credentialed teacher? The students' ability to assess their teacher's content-expertise is a debatable point. Ory (2001) contends:

Students should not be asked about things they cannot evaluate, such as the content of a course; they can however comment on whether they are

getting ample amounts of feedback on tests, getting their assignments returned, or learning much in the course. (p. 12)

On the one hand, only teaching colleagues who are expert in the content areas should peer assess to determine the depth and breadth of knowledge that would determine content expertise and teaching abilities. On the other hand, the student will inevitably be the judge of the teacher's level of expertise. There is little excuse for imparting inaccurate or dated materials to students who will ultimately transfer the information (or lack of information) into future courses or into the workplace, and be haunted by the effects of inferior instruction. This is where the upcoming discussion of the 'trustworthy' theme comes into play based on ethical teaching practice.

Valuing Life Experience

The concept of learning from experienced content-experts and using real-life examples as a classroom strategy stems from the observation that accomplished practitioners in any field have much to offer adult students, as reinforced in the following student comment:

One of the best and most reasonable professors with a lot of valuable academic and related life experience. (C20)

As content-experts, teachers can approximate the professional environment (legal, medical, managerial, etc.) because they have proven their skills and confidence in the workplace. As a result, the college classroom becomes a forum for the kind of discourse and the associated learning that characterize actual practice. This student describes the benefit of learning from a content-expert in an interactive setting:

One of the better teachers. Uses humour and a lot of real examples to help illustrate concepts. Class is interactive and you will learn a lot. Grading is fair and reasonable. (C69)

From an organizational perspective, Pfeffer & Sutton (1999) describe the opportunities learning from experience in the workplace can provide as “[it] occurs in dozens of daily activities, including participating in meetings, interactions with customers, supervising or being supervised, mentoring others, communicating with peers, and training others on the job” (p. 398).

Similarly, students who are training for professional careers or careers that involve the safety of self and the public, including the tradition of apprenticeship, are given classroom or lab opportunities to work on their professional issues, to engage with other students, and to practice the profession in a protected environment, under the supervision of a senior person, or content-expert (Boehrer & Linsky, 1990).

Empowering Teaching Characteristic

Student Progress and Empowerment

As mentioned earlier within the ‘competence’ theme discussion in Chapter Four, teachers need to be aware of their students’ progress, be willing to shift power and adjust what are clearly ineffective teaching strategies. Such discretion on the part of the teacher leads to the concept of trustworthiness in the teacher-student relationship. Inevitably, teachers need to take meaningful action to genuinely understand their teaching practice and to assist students with the advancement of their learning. Boehrer and Linsky (1990) conclude that “the best [content] is of little value in the hands of an unskilled teacher or unwilling student” (p. 45).

Brookfield (1986) comments on the importance of empowerment in adult education:

Empowering and developing in adults a sense that their personal power and self-worth is seen as a fundamental purpose of all education and training efforts [is essential]. Only if such a sense of individual empowerment is realized will adults possess the emotional strength to challenge behaviours, values and beliefs accepted uncritically by a majority. (p. 283)

MacKeracher (1996) describes empowerment as a two-phase process including “(1) growing in personal confidence and, (2) acting congruently with one’s own knowledge and values” (p. 233).

Drawing from personal experience, I agree with both Brookfield’s and MacKeracher’s descriptions of empowerment. I teach within a career program that requires students to have the confidence to provide treatment for patients. At the beginning of their training students are overwhelmed with content and new ways of thinking. By graduation, students are empowered with greater confidence and have achieved the necessary knowledge, skills, and values at an entry level for their profession. As an educator, it is my role to guide this process. I revel in watching students grow in confidence throughout their rigorous training and I am in awe of their ability to act congruently with their newly gained knowledge and skills.

Perceptive Teaching Characteristic

Teacher-student Relationship

It is apparent from this study that student success is influenced strongly by the teacher-student relationship. Fenwick and Parsons (2000) conclude “if your students know that you really care for them and want the best for them, they will forgive you almost any mistake. . . on the other hand if you are nasty and are ‘out to get them’ they will forgive you almost nothing” (p. 89). I believe that the latter component of this epiphany is one contributing motivation for the use of an informal online faculty rating system. Put into the context of this study wherein the perceptive teaching characteristic dominated the overall findings, students commented more on *how they were treated* than on *what they had learned* in the college classroom. So, is this phenomenon a reflection of hurt feelings or ineffective teaching? Either way, learning is affected. I turn to Tiberius and Billson’s (1991) study of the social context of teaching and learning to remind us that “teacher-student relationships can have positive effects on student development including: academic achievement, intellectual development, persistence in higher education, personality development, and educational aspirations” (p. 69).

Too Nice versus Too Harsh?

The dominance of the ‘perceptive’ teaching characteristic theme yielded two debatable points about mutual respect in the student-teacher relationship. In essence, as shown in the below comments, there clearly needs to be a balance between the teacher being “too nice” with warmth and friendliness and being “too harsh” with distance and

aloofness, especially if the extreme of either approach interferes with objective learning interactions. It is effective for teachers to generate positive connections with students provided the relationship does not become so casual that popularity overtakes credibility, such as may have happened in this case:

He was a fabulous prof. Very cool guy. Super laid back. He is pretty easy to talk to too. (C45)

Conversely, it is counter-productive for teachers to become removed and insensitive to students learning needs as reported here:

Mean, rude and intimidating. Wouldn't recommend. He will embarrass you if you make a mistake. (B14)

In either case, teachers should not rely only on their personalities (pleasant or cranky) to establish relationships with students and instead, when warranted, be prepared to use their intuitive abilities to empower students. For example, perceptive teachers can provide engaging, encouraging, and constructive direction, while still maintaining their objectivity.

I cannot imagine teachers who do not act to empower their students and instead act in an aggressive, uncaring manner as described in these student comments:

Not in tune with students. Not interested in teaching or seeing her student improve. (C48)

Massive drop out and failing rate. Somehow he totally doesn't care if most of the class does poorly even when they try. Make the class a little easier! (B50)

She says really quite mean things to people on their papers and assignments. I don't really understand where the aggression comes from, but it makes learning difficult. (A50)

I would encourage those teachers being critiqued in the above comments to re-visit sound adult teaching and learning principles. Perhaps they will then discover that the teaching and learning dynamic is established on mutual trust.

Trustworthy Teaching Characteristic

The ‘trustworthy’ teaching characteristic theme indicates students’ expectations of respectful, ethical and professional teaching practice that is foundational to effective classroom interactions with adult learners.

I believe that the teacher and the adult learner *should* be equal in the teaching and learning interaction. I continue to be taught about the nature of learning as my relationship with my students develops. I also realize that in order for this equality to occur I must publicly and authentically examine my personal philosophy of teaching and my underlying assumptions, recognize the effect of power dynamics on learning, and also be open to evaluation and change. I take this approach because students are more likely to be attracted to authentic teachers who are viewed as their trustworthy partners in learning (Cranton and Carusetta, 2004). I was struck by this student’s comment about the teacher in relation to the concept of trust and authenticity:

A wolf in sheep’s clothing. (C7)

While it is not within the scope of this study, it is important to note the potential bias that certain students may hold against both collective groups of teachers (e.g.: older, from a different culture, female), and individual teachers (e.g.: gay and lesbian), who may hold different values and politics, and thus be subject to unfair or more biased evaluation from students. I noticed that of the 300 anecdotal comments I examined, there were few

if any direct assaults on teachers from what could be considered a more ‘socio-cultural’ perspective, such as racism or sexism. Students were simply commenting on effective teaching characteristics and not expressing bias against collective or individual teachers who, in their authenticity, may have revealed different life-styles or values.

Ethical versus Unethical

In a broad context, it is completely unacceptable for students to be subjected to disrespectful, unethical and unprofessional teaching practice when other students in more respectful teaching environments are reaping the benefits of effective teaching and learning. The first example below is quite explicit in revealing unethical behaviour as was already discussed in the Chapter Four ‘Trustworthy’ theme findings. The second example below shows how student confidence was undermined when the teacher exhibited a power-over attitude in the management of his classes:

Dean please get rid of this guy, he makes the College a worse place. He might know his stuff... might, but he can't communicate at all. Worst of all, his marking and treatment of students is incredibly unethical. He sometimes publicly embarrasses people in class. (A84)

He was a horrible instructor and we had so many cancelled classes. He doesn't know the answer to stuff unless it's from a text book. He was not very helpful during the labs. He likes to sleep during labs. He didn't really review before finals but played games on his laptop instead of answering questions from the students during a review class. (A86)

The absence of quality assurance between teachers and courses leads to serious consequences that affect students. From a professional, self-policing approach, administrators and committed teachers are not likely to support colleagues who cannot be trusted to adhere to the teaching profession’s Code of Ethics or to the inviolable normative patterns that guide faculty teaching role performance.

The Chapter Four findings drawn from the ‘Trustworthy’ teaching characteristic theme showed alignment between students’ anecdotal comments and Braxton and Bayer’s (1999) seven inviolable norms that according to faculty, should be severely sanctioned. I continue that topic now by examining the following detrimental effects on students resulting from these inviolable behaviours.

Borrowing again from Braxton and Bayer (1999):

For college students, teaching constitutes a public activity . . . [and] students observe firsthand the teaching behaviours of college and university faculty members. From such first hand observations, students either personally experience or notice in other students the negative effects of norm violations. In contrast, college and university faculty members, at best, only indirectly observe or learn of the negative effects of teaching misconduct, generally from anecdotal student reports. (p. 104)

Furthermore, it is likely that most undergraduate students will experience some detrimental effects of faculty norm violations including: feeling a sense of moral outrage, falling behind in reading and completing graded assignments, experiencing strain and disharmony in the classroom, and falling victim to biased and inaccurate assessment of learning (Braxton, Bayer, & Noseworthy, 2002). Truly, these findings are without question unacceptable in post-secondary education.

Understandably, students are likely to back away from conflict and not formally report inappropriate teaching attitudes and behaviours based on the power that teachers hold over students while in the classroom (Braxton, Bayer, & Noseworthy, 2002). However, this student-held fear of repercussion from the teacher does not necessarily

hold true outside of the classroom when students participate in informal mechanisms of teacher evaluation.

As a means of resistance in the teacher-student power relationship, college students contribute to an anonymous online faculty rating system, such as *Rate My Professors* as a less traditional means of expressing their opinions about the teaching characteristics they experience. In the safety of their anonymity, they have the capacity to say what they think, despite the power of the instructor. As such, I conclude that the informal online postings are an invaluable and credible resource to expose unethical behaviours that must be investigated and that may otherwise not be disclosed through sanitized formal institutional evaluation processes.

Less Traditional Sources for Student Evaluation of Teaching Characteristics

On-line Faculty Rating Systems

Like it or not, this is the age of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) used by students as a primary source of communication that, amongst many applications, gives access to informal faculty rating systems such as Rate my Professors (RMP). There are teachers who firmly believe informal online faculty rating systems yield non-credible biased commentary, wherein students merely vent and gossip about their unsatisfactory classroom experiences. I wonder how these teachers would explain the highly positive and complimentary postings from satisfied students who access the same site. Rejecting the entire informal online rating system seems a little extreme under the circumstances - somewhat like 'throwing the baby out with the bath water'.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Otto, Sanford, and Ross (2008) conducted a validity study that investigated the pattern of relationships of online ratings and analysis that suggests online ratings in their current form may be useful, even though possible abuses could limit validity in specific instances. Their work acknowledges the increase in the use and popularity of online ratings that may be subject to possible bias, but also recognize that students may be providing their peers with accurate and dependable information. Otto, et al. (2008) determined that professor selection is sometimes based on RMP ratings and questioned “should we [faculty] ignore RMP ratings and even discourage students from relying on them, or should we admit [accept] that the ratings may contain some useful information?” (p. 4). Further to this deliberation, Otto, et al. (2008) also raised this logical question:

Of the millions of ratings in *Rate My Professors*, how many are biased? If there are few, or if the few are balanced between positive and negative rating, then the existence of biased ratings may be as small a problem as with other surveys of instructor performance. (p. 12)

This study’s findings disclosed student comments interpreted from both negative and positive perspectives (or the absence and presence) of effective teaching characteristics. As the researcher, I contend that the vast majority of the phenomenological student online evaluative comments in this study were authentic and credible and that the existence of biased ratings was remote. To support this contention beyond the finding of this study, I turn to Henri's (1992) content analysis of transcribed CMC to describe the quality of online student dialogue:

Student messages were lengthy, cognitively deep, embedded with peer references, and indicative of a student oriented environment . . . students were using high level cognitive skills such as inference and judgment as well as meta-cognitive strategies related to reflecting on experience and self-awareness. (p. 117)

Benefits of the Rate My Professors Web-site

Although RMP is a less traditional source for student evaluation of effective teaching characteristics, the findings of this study illustrate the numerous benefits to the informal online faculty rating system:

1. The Interpretive Analysis findings demonstrated that online faculty rating systems such as RMP yield a yet to be tapped source of uncensored and credible faculty evaluation data directly from students. This informal student evaluation is credible because the phenomenological student comments align with the empirical data and what we believe to be characteristics of effective teaching. There is potentially great value within the informal commentary in relation to the improvement of teaching and learning in post-secondary settings.
2. The anecdotal online comments are accessed from an informal faculty rating system that was created by students; it is less directive and less restrictive than a formal institutional evaluation form developed by researchers, educators, and administrators that may express bias in design. Online informal faculty rating systems are significantly different in design and appeal to adult students.

3. The informal online faculty rating system provides the opportunity for students to read each other's comments and then choose to agree or disagree (by rebuttal) if their experience of the same professor is similar or different. Students are engaging with each other and balancing the evaluative comments. This is not possible with individualized and anonymous formal institutional evaluation systems. Ratemyprofessors.ca has recently included a faculty rebuttal link that further broadens the scope of evaluative online dialogue.

4. In general, the anecdotal online comments appear to be less sanitized than comments made by students' on formal institutional evaluation systems. The impact of both effective and ineffective teaching is described explicitly, be it good, bad or indifferent and when bad, may lead to investigation of unethical teaching behaviours.

Summary of Discussion of Findings

The critical analysis in this chapter supported the thesis that, through their phenomenological postings on an informal online faculty rating system, students have discerned effective teaching characteristics based on a review of the current scholarship in this topic area. I have shown that there is a high level of shared understanding between what students consider effective and what the literature I have reviewed also notes as effective.

What have we learned from students' informal online perceptions and how can we use their messages to improve teaching and learning in college settings? Are college educators and administrators willing to *ACCEPT* the findings of the student commentary? The conclusions and recommendations are provided next in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Three major conclusions are drawn from the findings summarized in Chapter Four and debated in Chapter Five. There are also six recommendations provided that may be of interest to administrators, faculty, students, and institutional researchers regarding student evaluation of effective teaching characteristics and adult learning needs. It is important to note that these conclusions and recommendations are based on this doctoral dissertation and are simply a starting point. Additional studies will be needed to add a greater level of conclusiveness to the findings.

Individual colleges may find it beneficial to convene a representative committee of administrators, faculty and students to thoughtfully reflect upon the findings, conclusions and recommendations of this study, perhaps through the campus Teaching and Learning Centre activities. Early committee discussions might include the development of a pilot study to integrate informal online and formal institutional student evaluation to determine how each may complement or contrast with one another. Student societies and the Ombuds may also wish to be involved in discussions to achieve more student-friendly means of reporting ineffective or unethical teaching practice.

As stated throughout this dissertation, the goal was not to formalize an informal rating system, but rather to consider the benefits of accessing informal comments from RMP as an adjunct to institutional teaching evaluation tools. Furthermore, because the findings of this study do reveal student ability to discern effective teaching, I would suggest that teachers access RMP as a credible source of student commentary on their teaching.

Conclusions

Students Provide Credible Evaluation

Informal student comments about effective teaching characteristics, from an online faculty rating system, provided valuable and credible student evaluation that should not be discounted by post-secondary educational institutions. College students are capable of discerning and reporting characteristics of effective teaching as defined by empirical research that could lead to transformation in how informal student evaluations are viewed and applied within post-secondary education in British Columbia.

This conclusion is substantiated by the six attribution themes derived from the students' online perceptions of effective teaching characteristics: Articulate; Competent, Content-expert, Empowering, Perceptive, and Trustworthy (The ACCEPT Model of Student Discernment of Effective Teaching Characteristics) and by the interpretive analysis of each theme. Further evidence of student comment credibility is provided through two summary academic references that align closely with the ACCEPT model.

Firstly, Feldman's (1988) extensive review of student rating research concludes that "the teacher's preparation and organization, clarity and ability to be understood, and sensitivity to, and concern with class level and progress are highly important" (p. 316).

Secondly, Patrick and Smart's (1998) factor analysis confirms that teacher effectiveness is multi-dimensional in nature and comprises three critical factors: respect for students; ability to challenge students; organisation and presentation skills.

Students Circumvent the Power Structure of the Institution via Informal Online Evaluations

Students are motivated to informally disclose their stories about classroom experiences through the non-traditional anonymous online faculty rating system, as they have limited opportunity to openly and formally address their concerns within the power-structure of the institution and its sanitized evaluation process. Students are generally willing to do formal evaluations and provide feedback, and have no particular fear of repercussions. However, they have little confidence that the faculty or administrators pay attention to the results and do not even review the ratings themselves (Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002).

It appears that the meaningful *informal* flow of evaluative data in educational settings is being disregarded by ‘stigmatized’ educators while *formal*, less effective evaluative strategies are employed. I contend that disregarding the *informal* student evaluation of teaching effectiveness represents a significant loss of constructive data for educators. Nuhfer (2004) provides further insight to this concept:

If educators had earlier called the questionnaires ‘student satisfaction surveys’ rather than ‘teacher evaluations’, we [educators] would probably be further along in embracing our students’ comments and getting the benefits from them rather than being stigmatized . . . the research shows that we [educators] are not good judges of ourselves, and we need the communication from our students to help define ways to serve them better. (p. 21)

If teachers were to view RMP ratings as a valuable source of information on teaching effectiveness instead of an ‘evaluation’ of their teaching, a more open and willing exchange may occur within the college community.

Teacher-Student Relationships—Partners to Improve Education

I experienced a growing appreciation for the ‘art of teaching’ in the course of this research. Each student comment I interpreted increased my awareness of both the privilege and the fragility of the teacher-student relationship. I heard the voices behind the students’ words that ranged from their energetic praise to their alarming level of dissatisfaction. Within the three college sites located in British Columbia, fewer than 50% of the collected 300 anecdotal comments reflected satisfaction with classroom experiences while more than 50% reflected some level of dissatisfaction. I question if educators and administrators would *ACCEPT* this mediocre level of quality assurance.

This significant finding alone provides strong reason for an overdue investigation to improve college teaching practices and what appear to be ineffective institutional faculty evaluation processes. With that said, it is important to emphasize that there are many professional and committed college teachers who provide excellent service in the college environment and who are frustrated by sub-standard teaching practices that reflect poorly on the faculty as a whole, and that also impact the reputation of the educational institution.

From the early stages of the data analysis it was obvious that students primarily reported on *how they were treated by their teachers* with a secondary focus on *what they learned* in the classroom, revealing the need for mutually respectful teacher-student

relationships. This dominant message about the value of teacher-student relationships concurs with Nuhfer's (2004) remarks:

Student evaluations are not just an assessment of specific faculty work being done, instead they are ratings derived from students' overall *feelings* arising from an inseparable mix of learning, pedagogical approaches, communication skills, and affective factors that may or may not be important to student learning. (p. 4)

A greater acceptance and understanding of informal online student evaluation as a credible commentary for change cannot help but improve classroom relationships and benefit teachers and students as partners in education.

Recommendations to Promote and Improve Teaching Effectiveness and Learning

With the goal of promoting and improving post-secondary teaching effectiveness in British Columbia to the benefit of both adult students and teachers, the following six recommendations were derived from the research findings and are consistent with the purpose and objectives of this study:

1. Explore the use of informal online student evaluation of effective teaching characteristics, to promote credible and authentic teaching practice, aligned with self-regulated learning strategies that are both beneficial and desirable to adult learners.
2. Promote voluntary faculty development opportunities that demonstrate how humour and novelty may be used to enhance learning, as many anecdotal student comments relate to the positive effect of humour and novelty in the

learning environment or conversely, the negative effect when humour and novelty are absent.

3. Address power relations in the classroom that interfere with learning, as voiced through informal student evaluation of teaching effectiveness, and intervene when the quality of teaching is unacceptable to students and the teaching profession.
4. Build on the framework of the ACCEPT Model of Student Discernment of Effective Teaching Characteristics to develop an informal adjunct to the institutional rating system. The interpretive analysis of this study revealed that students' informal anecdotal comments align with empirical research on effective teaching characteristics and principles of adult learning.
5. Build on the framework of the ACCEPT Model of Student Discernment of Effective Teaching Characteristics, to promote and integrate effective teaching characteristics. Also, with faculty agreement, conduct regular classroom research (i.e., accessing informal student evaluation) and improve teaching practice with ongoing in-service training, student and peer feedback.
6. Improve the method of retrieving student evaluation of effective teaching characteristics by accessing informal and less traditional student communication, including data accessed from anonymous online faculty rating systems, while also acknowledging that students' informal comments reflect credible commentary; even though possible abuses could limit validity in specific instances (Otto, et al., 2008).

The six recommendations provide opportunities to: (1) *accept* informal student evaluation as credible commentary, (2) *listen* to informal student evaluation as both constructive and beneficial, and (3) *transform* how informal student evaluation of teaching effectiveness is viewed and applied.

Recommendations One and Two: Opportunity to *Accept* Credible Commentary

Recommendation One.

Explore the use of informal online student evaluation of effective teaching characteristics, to promote credible and authentic teaching practice, aligned with self-regulated learning strategies that are both beneficial and desirable to adult learners.

Brookfield (1990) defines credibility that leads to authentic practice:

Teacher credibility refers to teachers' ability to present themselves as people with something to offer students. When teachers provide this credibility, students see them as possessing a breadth of knowledge, depth of insight, and length of experience that far exceeds the students' own. (p. 163)

Research also shows that students' perceptions of the learning environment, their experiences of autonomy and the supportive behaviour of teachers have influence on active student involvement in learning. (van Grinsven & Tillema, 2006)

Recommendation Two.

Promote voluntary faculty development opportunities that demonstrate how humour and novelty may be used to enhance learning, as many anecdotal student

comments relate to the positive effect of humour and novelty in the learning environment or conversely, the negative effect when humour and novelty are absent.

The ‘perceptive theme’ findings in Chapter Four revealed the often missing link of novelty in the classroom. Students consistently expressed a strong desire for humour, fun and interaction. Fenker and Schutze (2009) report “novelty has practical implications for educators . . . [because] we remember things better in the context of novelty” (p. 47).

Recommendation Three: Opportunity to *Listen* to Constructive and Beneficial Feedback

Recommendation Three.

Address power relations in the classroom that interfere with learning, as voiced through informal student evaluation of teaching effectiveness, and intervene when the quality of teaching is unacceptable to students and the teaching profession.

Jarvis (1992) discusses power relations that interfere with learning and provides this solution “educators need to generate awareness [by listening] and foster motivation with use of dialogue to “learn and grow together with their students” (p. 114). Teachers who are multidimensional exhibit respect and openness while also promoting individual and group learning processes and providing supportive teaching environments. Mutual, reciprocal and collaborative learning environments that are supportive encourage knowledge retention and sustainability (Edmonds, Lowe, Murray & Seymour, 2002).

Recommendations Four, Five and Six: Opportunity to Transform

McKeachie (1983) credits adult students' ability to provide meaningful evaluation of effective teaching. "Students are in class almost every day and they know what is going on. They are the ones we are trying to affect and they have some sense of whether they are learning" (p. 38). As the researcher, I believe McKeachie's acknowledgement is the first step toward transformation of how informal student evaluation is viewed and applied. Recommendations four, five and six will benefit teachers and students as partners to improve adult education standards.

Recommendation Four.

Build on the framework of the ACCEPT Model of Student Discernment of Effective Teaching Characteristics to develop an informal adjunct to the institutional rating system. The interpretive analysis of this study revealed that students' informal anecdotal comments align with empirical research on effective teaching characteristics.

Recommendation Five.

Build on the framework of the ACCEPT Model of Student Discernment of Effective Teaching Characteristics, to promote and integrate effective teaching characteristics. Also, with faculty agreement, conduct regular classroom research (i.e., accessing informal student evaluation) and improve teaching practice with ongoing in-service training, student and peer feedback.

Recommendation Six.

Improve the method of student evaluation of effective teaching characteristics by accessing informal and less traditional student communication, including data accessed from anonymous online faculty rating systems, while also acknowledging that students' informal comments reflect credible commentary; even though possible abuses could limit validity in specific instances (Otto, et al., 2008).

I believe that teachers must seek meaningful dialogue with the students and other stakeholders to promote realistic self-evaluation and to examine their dimensions of effective teaching practice. McKeachie (1997) reminds us that:

Effective teaching is not just a matter of finding a method that works well and using it consistently; rather teaching is an interactive process between students and the teacher. Good teaching involves building bridges between what is in your head and what is in the students' heads. (p. 225)

Once again, I turn to credible student commentary that reflects either the presence or absence of effective teaching characteristics to reinforce McKeachie's concept and to support recommendations four, five and six:

This guy knows how to teach. What I liked best was his attempt to get the class involved in the questions so ensure everyone has an understanding that is crystal clear. He is very approachable for questions and explains things extremely well. Great teacher. (A14)

I loved the course content and tried to participate, but withdrew because of her teaching style. She is not open-minded to other views or opinions; it's her way or no way. Not encouraging of independent thought or analysis, she's right, you're wrong. It's too bad; I was really interested in the topic. I wouldn't recommend her under any circumstances. (C55)

Dissertation Contributions to the Academic Research

Student discernment and the subsequent analyses of online student perceptions described within this dissertation have contributed to our knowledge of informal evaluative communication and the practice of effective teaching characteristics. This dissertation's contributions are further substantiated in relation to the following three studies.

Firstly, the findings of this dissertation addressed a future research recommendation from the Onwuegbuzie, et al. (2007) mixed methods analysis and validity study of a teaching evaluation form. These researchers raised the question of the continued use of teaching evaluation forms (TEF) that omit what students deem to be the most important characteristics of effective college teachers: (1) transmitter, (2) responsive, and (3) connector. Two *ACCEPT* themes reported in this dissertation, 'Articulate' and 'Perceptive', substantiate and support the inclusion of these three omitted characteristics of effective teaching on the teaching evaluation form. Student anecdotal comments represented within the Perceptive theme were most dominant within the analyses of this dissertation.

Secondly, the findings of this dissertation contribute to the Otto, Sanford, and Ross (2008) validity study that investigated the pattern of relationships of online ratings. They recommended that increased understanding of the ratings could assist students in matching their learning styles with compatible professors and instructors should improve their teaching methods to improve their ratings. Otto, et al. (2008) suggest online ratings in their current form may be useful, even though possible abuses could limit validity in specific instances. Their study concluded that "to the extent that online ratings can be

valid measures to teaching effectiveness, online ratings have potential value” (p. 13). These researchers recommended further research into the benefits arising from online ratings related to the students’ selection of professors. This dissertation contributed to the Otto, et al. (2008) study by increasing the credibility of the online anecdotal comments, noting that the themed *ACCEPT* findings from British Columbia colleges aligned with the summarized empirical research on effective teaching characteristics. As a result, British Columbia’s college students have the benefit of accessing a more credible source based on peer information when selecting their professors.

Finally, Pan, Tan, Ragupathi, Booluck, Roop, and Ip (2008) concluded that using quantified student ratings alone to discriminate between faculty members for teaching assessment would be an incomplete process. These researchers contend that student ratings should be “augmented by qualitative interpretation of student written feedback; it is only then that we can give meaning to the numerical nature of student ratings” (p. 98). This dissertation’s primary focus was on the qualitative interpretation of students’ online written feedback related to effective teaching characteristics that could subsequently contribute to the research initiated by Pan, et al. (2008).

Implications for Future Research

Unanswered questions that emerged from this study may produce future inquiry about informal evaluative communication and effective teaching characteristics.

To address the potential issue of some students using anonymous, online rating systems to “get back” at those teachers who hold to high academic standards and do not give “easy A’s”, I recommend there be a correlational study to determine if there is any

relationship between positive and negative anonymous student ratings and individual faculty grade distributions. Do teachers with a lower grade distribution receive harsher anonymous student comments and do teachers with higher grade distributions receive more positive anonymous student comments? Based on this qualitative study, I predict there will not be a strong correlation because adult students are able to discern effective teaching characteristics. I believe students are being point blank honest, in the safety of their anonymous online postings, when reporting their independent classroom experiences.

It would be interesting to do a post-course follow-up study of students two to three years later to determine how they would rate their teachers from an historical perspective. By consulting their own past, there is the distinct possibility that students who at the time may have rated an instructor harshly, may now have grown to appreciate the teacher they originally criticized. Now that they have gone on to higher-level courses or are in their chosen career they may realize that what once seemed to be a very difficult and challenging course, was in fact a course that effectively prepared them for their future activities. I predict that in some cases the students may look more favourably on some teachers who they originally had rated harshly, once they have the time and experience to appreciate the course content and the teacher's high standards.

I would also find it fascinating to conduct a qualitative study with teachers who have been rated harshly on an online faculty rating system, to hear their voice and their side of the story. This dialogue and research would add greatly to the academic literature, with the potential of gaining meaningful insights. I leave open the possibility

that there may be very good explanations that could either justify or nullify the harsh student ratings.

An additional direction for future research would be to interview administrators and institutional researchers on their thoughts about anonymous online faculty rating systems. Do they ever look at these “unofficial” rating systems? Do they see any value to these student comments? Do they have an interest in developing these types of student rating systems? Based on the outcomes of this dissertation, are they concerned that over 50% of the 300 student comments were negative, indicating the absence of effective teaching characteristics, and if true, the comments revealed some extremely unprofessional teaching activities. I believe it would be fruitful research to engage in dialogue with those in “official evaluative roles” (e.g., deans and institutional researchers) to capture their thoughts about anonymous, online student comments that disclose teachers’ unprofessional behaviours.

I also think it would be very interesting to conduct research to learn if teachers are interested in receiving a RMP type of formative feedback so they can possibly adjust their teaching practices at mid-course. There is the possibility that some teachers are simply not aware that their teaching style is not working for their current students. For example, if students are unhappy because the class never ends on time, or the teacher uses the same phrase over and over, or the faculty member is never clear on when assessment will occur or what will be covered on an exam, then these relatively simple issues could be addressed in mid-course with very minor adjustments. I predict this informal approach of receiving formative student feedback may reverse a number of classroom issues before the issues get out of control.

It would be interesting to see how generational differences might motivate certain student comments. As we have aging ‘baby-boomer’ teachers, who are well into their fifties, there may be up to a 30 year age range between them and their students. This generation gap could create an inability for students to relate effectively with their teachers and vice-versa. The same teachers, who twenty years ago were actually closer to the age of their students, may simply have been able to relate more effectively to their students on a generational basis. The outcomes from this type of research might indicate the benefits of conducting “generational awareness” training for both students and faculty.

There are millions of student postings from across North America placed on RMP or other online faculty rating systems that generate an ever-changing database of public information about teaching characteristics. Further research needs to be conducted to investigate and understand more fully what motivates students to use these online faculty rating systems over other methods, as this was not a focus of this study, and the topic merits closer attention.

I recommend that the future research outlined above be conducted to further enhance what we have learned from this study about students’ anecdotal perceptions of effective teaching characteristics, posted on an informal online faculty rating system.

Concluding Comments

As a college educator and researcher, it was remarkable to interpret student online comments and align the findings with relevant literature. It is clear from the emerging themes that students share common perceptions about effective teaching characteristics.

From this, I find myself highly motivated to advocate for change in how we *ACCEPT* informal student evaluation. I remain encouraged by Brookfield's (1986) contention that "informality and flexibility are not necessarily handicaps to valid evaluation, but rather they can be used as guidelines for framing distinctively adult educational evaluative procedures" (p. 274). I believe this is a concept that must be further explored and implemented to improve college teaching and learning practice in British Columbia.

The students' willingness to share their classroom experiences with peers and others, has made this research possible. The student voices behind their words are real, and the *ACCEPT* themes clearly reflect their ability to discern effective teaching characteristics. I will therefore leave the last words of this study to one credible student voice that captured it all:

She is amazing, and her enthusiasm is contagious. The formats of her classes were great- the discussions and group work were very engaging. She also had a great way of starting each class with a really helpful review summary of the conclusions of the previous day's discussions for those who benefit from it in a nutshell. I learned so much. You will love her. (A29)

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Appendix A: Human Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval of Waiver



Human Research Ethics Board
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**University
 of Victoria**

Human Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval of Waiver

<u>Principal Investigator</u> Janet Reagan Ph.D. Student	<u>Department/School</u> EPLS	<u>Supervisor</u> Dr. Darlene Clover
<u>Co-Investigator(s):</u> David Reagan, Ed D		
<u>Project Title:</u> Content Analysis of Students' Anecdotal Online Faculty Ratings: Student Discernment of Teaching Effectiveness		
<u>Protocol No.</u> 08-097	<u>Approval Date</u> 22-May-08	<u>Start Date</u> 22-May-08
		<u>Expiry Date</u> 21-May-09

Certification

This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concluded that, in all respects, the proposed research meets the appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Participants.

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the protocol. Extensions and/or amendments may be approved with the submission of a "Request for Annual Renewal or Modification" form.

Dr. Richard Keeler
 Associate Vice-President, Research

Reagan, Janet

Appendix B: Rate My Professors Privacy Policy

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Appendix C: Analysis of Attributions Chart

Presence and absence of effective teaching characteristics: Attributions derived from students' anecdotal comments.

<u>A</u> RTICULATE	IN <u>A</u> RTICULATE	<u>C</u> OMPETENT	IN <u>C</u> OMPETENT	<u>C</u> ONTENT- <u>E</u> XPERT	AMATEUR
consistent understandable directive clear communicative	inconsistent incomprehensible uncommunicative contradictory vague nitpicky confusing frustrating unpredictable unclear	organized prepared adaptable participatory interactive fulfilling qualified skilled fair	disorganized ill-prepared mismanaged uptight nervous unrealistic lacks initiative bad no structure poor follow-up irrelevant material bad writer unskilled lazy helpless unfair	brilliant intellectual informative intelligent provocative stimulating is knowledgeable exceptional amazing interesting awesome realistic role-model	waffles ignorant inaccurate stupid lost out-to-lunch knew nothing no idea of what-he speaks makes mistakes regularly absolute dope doesn't have correct answers nonsensical is not knowledgeable eccentric inexperienced

Appendix C: Analysis of Attributions Chart - Continued

Presence and absence of effective teaching characteristics: Attributions derived from students' anecdotal comments.

<u>EMPOWERING</u>	NOT EMPOWERING	<u>PERCEPTIVE</u>	NOT PERCEPTIVE	<u>TRUSTWORTHY</u>	UNTRUSTWORTHY
inspirational motivational challenging encouraging stimulating	egocentric discouraging self-absorbed	enthusiastic passionate engaging creative personable fun funny humorous witty hilarious empathetic approachable generous (time/interest) open-minded patient cooperative available helpful friendly responsive understanding kind caring nice flexible reasonable	indifferent boring humorless lacks awareness moody sketchy fear inducing aggressive impatient intimidating non-responsive unapproachable negative uncaring inflexible narrow minded unsympathetic arrogant opinionated egotistic mean painful weird biased abusive impossible unreasonable distant	reliable genuine admirable professional respected respectful authentic forgiving diplomatic	unethical mistrusting discriminatory condescending disrespectful irresponsible offensive unprofessional hypocritical rude