



Characteristics of effective university lecturers: A qualitative analysis of student perspectives using informal conversations from a reddit thread

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Abstract

This study examines student perceptions of effective university lecturers through a qualitative content analysis of online comments. Utilizing Mayring's approach, the study analyzed 37 comments from a Reddit thread, identifying key themes and quantifying their frequency. The results emphasize the significance of teaching materials, didactic methods, and interpersonal skills in effective teaching. These findings provide valuable insights into student expectations and preferences, which can inform faculty development and enhance the quality of higher education instruction.

Keywords: Qualitative Content Analysis; University Lecturers; Teaching Effectiveness; Student Feedback; Teaching

1. Introduction

The quality of university teaching significantly impacts student learning outcomes and satisfaction. As higher education institutions strive to enhance their educational offerings, understanding what constitutes effective teaching from the student perspective becomes increasingly vital. Previous research has extensively explored this subject, shedding light on various attributes and practices that contribute to teaching excellence. As a qualitative researcher with a substantial body of work in this area, I aimed to investigate whether these established findings are reflected in student perspectives shared on an online platform [1, 2, 3, 4].

This study specifically examines the characteristics students associate with effective lecturers by analyzing comments from a Reddit thread. Reddit was chosen for its accessibility and the propensity of users to provide candid, detailed responses. The thread in question asked users to describe the qualities of their best university lecturers, thereby providing a rich source of qualitative data. By scrutinizing these firsthand accounts, the study seeks to gain valuable insights into the qualities and practices that most strongly resonate with students in the learning process.

Exploring student feedback from this contemporary source not only validates existing research but also uncovers new dimensions of effective teaching as perceived by students. This contributes to the ongoing discourse on improving teaching practices in higher education, ensuring that the voices of students remain central to the development of pedagogical strategies.

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2. Methods

2.1. Data Collection

The study collected comments from a Reddit thread discussing lecturer qualities. This platform was chosen for its accessibility and the tendency of users to provide candid, detailed responses. The thread specifically asked users to describe the characteristics of their best university lecturers, thus offering a rich source of qualitative data.

From this thread, a total of 37 comments from the year 2023 were analyzed, focusing on the characteristics and skills of university lecturers. Initially, the dataset comprised 65 comments. However, several comments were excluded from the analysis as they consisted of questions, responses to other posts, expressions of agreement, deleted content, or moderator interventions. Consequently, the 37 comments retained for analysis represent approximately 57% of the original dataset. This careful selection process ensured that the analysis concentrated on the most substantive and relevant contributions within the thread.

2.2. Analysis

The methodological framework for this study was based on the model of qualitative content analysis developed by Philipp Mayring [5]. In the initial phase, comments posted on Reddit were scrutinized for relevant information using a category framework that was deductively derived. This approach ensured that the analysis was systematic and focused on the most pertinent aspects of the data. Following the identification of relevant information, the extracted data were systematically analyzed, summarized, and structured to reveal underlying patterns and themes [6].

The application of Mayring's qualitative content analysis model allowed for a rigorous and structured examination of the data, facilitating an in-depth understanding of the students' perspectives. This comprehensive approach ensured that the analysis was not only thorough but also grounded in a robust methodological framework [7]. By using a deductively derived category framework, the study was able to maintain a high level of focus and relevance, ensuring that the most significant data were systematically identified and analyzed.

Table 1 Overview of categories

Category	teaching materials	didactics and methodology	interpersonal and ethical aspects
Number of Comments	16 comments	20 comments	9 comments
Subcategory	- Provide materials -Structured instructional content	- Explanation proficiency - Subject expertise - Communication competence - Teaching methods	- Respect and interest - Engagement and passion
Examples	«Provides materials digitally», «clearly organized and comprehensible materials»	«handles questions confidently», «engaging storyteller who is enjoyable to listen to»	«respectful interaction», «a good professor takes their students seriously»

3. Results

The analysis of student comments revealed three primary categories that shed light on the factors contributing to effective teaching in higher education.

First, teaching materials were frequently mentioned by students, emphasizing the provision of comprehensive and well-organized course materials such as lecture notes, slides, and additional resources. The relevance, accuracy, and up-to-date nature of these materials were highlighted as critical elements, reflecting the students' appreciation for resources that facilitate their learning process.

Second, didactics and methodology emerged as significant themes. Students particularly valued lecturers who exhibited strong explanatory competence, capable of deconstructing complex concepts into understandable components and providing clear and concise explanations. Furthermore, the ability of lecturers to engage students through questions, discussions, and interactive activities was frequently noted. Diverse and innovative teaching methods, including the use

of real-world examples and multimedia tools, were also highly regarded by students, underscoring the importance of pedagogical versatility in maintaining student interest and enhancing learning outcomes.

Lastly, interpersonal and ethical aspects played a crucial role in students' perceptions of effective teaching. Respect and genuine interest in students' learning and well-being were emphasized as essential qualities in lecturers. Additionally, lecturers who demonstrated enthusiasm for their subject and a passion for teaching were particularly esteemed by students, highlighting the impact of an educator's attitude and engagement on the overall learning experience.

A quantitative analysis of the comments provided further insights into the characteristics of the feedback. The analysis of comment lengths revealed significant insights into the nature and depth of student feedback regarding university lecturers' characteristics and skills. The comments were categorized into three distinct groups based on their length: short, medium, and long.

Short comments, those containing fewer than 20 words, comprised 37.84% of the dataset and typically included brief but pointed observations. Examples of these comments include statements such as "Passion for teaching." and "Provide materials alongside the lecture, not just a week before the exam." These concise comments, although brief, highlight key attributes appreciated by students, such as a lecturer's enthusiasm and organization regarding course materials.

Medium comments, which ranged between 20 and 100 words, formed the largest category, making up 48.65% of the comments. These comments provided more detailed feedback and often included specific examples or personal anecdotes. For instance, one student appreciated a professor who provided preliminary explanations to help understand proofs, describing this approach as the "most didactically sensible" they had encountered. Another comment expressed admiration for professors who could translate complex concepts into simple, entertaining explanations, valued for avoiding a "spoken textbook" style of teaching. These medium-length comments reflect students' appreciation for clarity, engagement, and didactic skill in teaching.

Long comments, defined as those exceeding 100 words, constituted the remaining portion of the dataset (13.51% of the comments). These comments offered in-depth narratives and detailed evaluations of teaching experiences. For example, one student recounted an exceptional lecture delivered by a postdoc who had to substitute spontaneously. The postdoc's approach, which involved numerous self-explanations and interactive questioning, made the material notably accessible and comprehensible. This detailed account underscores the importance of adaptability and interactive teaching methods in effective education.

In conclusion, the categorization of comments by length provided valuable insights into students' perceptions of effective teaching. Short comments often highlighted key qualities succinctly, medium comments elaborated on specific attributes and provided personal examples, while long comments offered comprehensive narratives that detailed impactful teaching practices. This diversity in comment lengths and content underscores the multifaceted nature of effective teaching and the varied ways students experience and communicate their educational preferences.

In terms of sentiment, the majority of the feedback was positive (51.35%), while negative and neutral sentiments were equally distributed, each accounting for 24.32%.

These findings underscore the complexity of effective teaching, which encompasses not only the quality and organization of teaching materials but also the pedagogical and interpersonal skills of educators. It suggests that a holistic approach, integrating comprehensive resource provision, diverse teaching methodologies, and strong interpersonal engagement, is essential for fostering a positive and productive learning environment in higher education.

4. Discussion

The results of this study largely align with existing literature on effective teaching in higher education while also providing nuanced insights into student perspectives. The findings support several key theories and principles in educational research.

The high frequency of mentions related to teaching materials underscores the importance of accessible and well-structured resources in supporting student learning. This finding is consistent with research on the role of instructional materials in facilitating learning and promoting student success [3, 4, 8].

Both subject knowledge and didactic skills are highly valued by students, as evidenced by the frequent mentions of content quality and explanatory competence. Biggs and Tang [9] and Voss, Szmigin and Gruber [10] emphasize the

importance of subject knowledge, while Fink [11] and Voss [12] highlights the significance of didactic skills. Effective lecturers, according to students, possess deep subject knowledge and the ability to convey that knowledge in an accessible and engaging manner.

Students' appreciation for diverse and innovative teaching methods reflects the growing recognition of the need for varied instructional approaches to accommodate different learning styles and enhance engagement [13].

The findings support Ramsden's [14] assertion that enthusiasm for the subject and interest in students enhance learning motivation and performance. Students particularly value lecturers who can explain complex concepts simply, engage interactively, and employ diverse teaching methods. This aligns with contemporary educational theories that emphasize active learning and student-centered approaches [15].

The emphasis on interpersonal aspects, such as respect and passion for teaching, aligns with Chickering and Gamson's [16] principles of good practice in undergraduate education, which stress the importance of faculty-student contact and enthusiasm. This highlights the relational aspect of teaching and learning, suggesting that effective lecturers not only deliver content but also create a positive and supportive learning environment [1, 2].

The findings of this study suggest multiple avenues for enhancing teaching practices within higher education contexts. Firstly, emphasis should be placed on faculty development. Universities need to prioritize the enhancement of lecturers' pedagogical skills, specifically in areas highly valued by students such as proficiency in explaining complex concepts, the employment of interactive teaching methodologies, and the creation of superior educational materials.

Moreover, meticulous attention to course design is imperative. The formulation of well-structured courses, accompanied by clear and readily accessible materials, is essential. Incorporating a variety of learning activities can significantly foster student engagement and active participation.

Another critical aspect involves the interpersonal skills of lecturers. Comprehensive training programs should incorporate modules aimed at refining effective communication techniques, demonstrating respect and responsiveness to student needs, and exhibiting enthusiasm for the respective subject matter.

Furthermore, the integration of technology constitutes a pivotal component of modern teaching practices. In light of the importance students attribute to diverse instructional methods, universities are encouraged to facilitate the incorporation of technology and multimedia resources into the curriculum.

Lastly, the establishment of robust feedback mechanisms is necessary for the continuous improvement of teaching quality. Regular collection and systematic analysis of student feedback will provide invaluable insights that can guide both institutional strategies and individual lecturers' efforts to enhance their pedagogical effectiveness .

5. Conclusion

The analysis of student comments revealed three primary categories crucial for effective teaching in higher education: teaching materials, didactics and methodology, and interpersonal and ethical aspects. Students emphasized the importance of comprehensive, well-organized, and up-to-date materials. They also valued lecturers with strong explanatory competence who could simplify complex concepts and engage students through interactive methods. Interpersonal skills, such as respect and passion for teaching, were highlighted as essential qualities for creating a positive learning environment. The categorization of comments by length—short, medium, and long—provided additional insight into the depth and nature of student feedback, with a majority of the feedback being positive. These findings underscore the complexity of effective teaching, which encompasses both the quality of teaching materials and the pedagogical and interpersonal skills of educators. A holistic approach, integrating comprehensive resource provision, diverse teaching methodologies, and strong interpersonal engagement, is essential for fostering a productive learning environment. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on improving higher education practices by ensuring that student voices remain central to the development of pedagogical strategies.

As a qualitative researcher, it was particularly intriguing to observe that the analyses from my previous research were largely reflected in the comments from the Reddit thread [1, 2, 3, 4]. This alignment indicates the consistency of student perspectives on effective teaching across different platforms and supports the validity of the findings from my earlier work. The concurrence of these insights highlights key elements of effective university teaching that remain prominent regardless of the medium through which they are expressed. Moreover, this study extends the understanding of these elements by contextualizing them within a contemporary digital forum. The utilization of an online platform such as

Reddit offers a unique perspective, capturing candid and detailed student feedback in a less formal environment compared to traditional survey or interview methods. This approach not only corroborates existing knowledge but also enriches it by incorporating a broader range of student voices.

While this study provides valuable insights into student perspectives on effective teaching, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The focus on a single online thread and the inherent potential bias in the self-selected sample may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study's reliance on written comments may not fully capture the complexity of student experiences and preferences.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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