

Succeeding Alone and Together

University Students' Perceptions of Caring Online Teaching

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Abstract

Studying and learning means adaptation of new information, skills, and values. Students' previous knowledge and experiences direct their studies, and in the best case, these experiences are positive. Learning is always a social process, too. How do new learning environments at universities influence students' individuality and communality? Are students left alone and to work just with their computers? What kinds of experiences do students have of online teaching? In this study, these questions were asked from students studying at a

Finnish university. Based on their perceptions, four features of an ideal online teaching and learning environment were found. Online solutions, when based on caring teaching, can provide new positive experiences of learning and teaching to teachers and students.

Keywords: Online teaching, Online learning, University studies, Caring teaching, Interaction

1. Introduction

Positive and caring teaching is not limited only in face-to-face encounters with students (Maor, 2003; Niemi & Multisilta, 2014). Nowadays, more and more teaching takes place in online environments and especially for university students the flexibility that these teaching arrangements provide have become very important (Bouhnik & Marcus, 2006; Lindstrom, 2012; Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw, & Liu, 2006). Online teaching enables participation regardless of place and usually, for example, lectures can also be watched afterwards and again and again from recordings. In our university which is located in the northernmost Finland with students coming from across the country from long distances, the opportunity to study—even part of the university studies—online has been considered important in many ways.

University students are young adults who are about to build their own lives, enter the work markets and start families. Not only in Finland but also abroad, students usually work alongside their studies, and workplaces are not always near the university. There are various student-related reasons why online teaching arrangements can make their studies more flexible and smoother (Kim & Bunk, 2006). From the university perspective, modern teaching methods and arrangements increase their desirability and enhance image (Curran, 2004). For university teachers, teaching some courses online may provide a way of learning new teaching methods and reflecting their teaching skills, and to perceive interaction with students in new ways—their online social presence, as Aragon (2003) put it. According to Jacobsen, Clifford, and Friesen (2002), teachers need confidence to think broadly with technology when it comes, for example, to the aforementioned elements of teaching.

As noted, there are many studies about the benefits of online teaching arrangements but of course, some disadvantages exist too. One of them is the lack of direct contact with the teacher and other students: as quite a bit of human interaction is actually non-verbal, online interaction becomes somewhat limited in this sense (Stacey, 2002; Tian, Yu, Vogel, & Kwok, 2011). In a pedagogical sense, online teaching necessitates various types of expertise from the teachers, too, such as paying attention to how differently communication happens in online environments compared to classroom interaction, and misunderstandings or misinterpretations may happen more easily (Wilson & Stacey, 2004).

Naturally, there are different courses in universities that include different levels of online elements. One way of describing the dimensions between ordinary face-to-face teaching and online teaching is presented by Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples, and Tickner (2001), who see the flexibility in four dimension: (1) classroom teaching, (2) computer-enhanced classroom teaching, (3) tutor enhanced online learning, and (4) independent online learning. In the aforementioned categorizations, the role of teacher remains unclear, while it shows well how students' own activity changes towards independent learning as the role of online features increase. Keengwe and Kidd (2010) present the categorization into (1) traditional face-to-face courses; (2) fully online courses; (3) blended courses; and (4) web-facilitated courses. In this article, we use the concept of online teaching and learning when referring to various kinds of courses taught online without face-to-face contact with the teacher but where

the teacher still does the teaching. However, this still requires plenty of independent and self-directed studying from students. Keengwe and Kidd (2010) describe the educational characteristics of current online teaching as follows: “Interactive distance courseware distributed online through learning management systems with social networking components; learning that is facilitated via a wireless device such as a PDA, a smart phone or a laptop; learning with portable technologies where the focus is on the mobility of the learner.” Basically, from the perspective of this research, the level of virtual elements is not the crucial part but the way the teacher acts and works with students in the learning environment and how students perceive it are.

So, how do university students themselves perceive online teaching? We asked university students to describe their experiences of online teaching. The purpose was to find out how they perceived the teachers’ actions in such environments and how they would describe, for example, interaction with the teacher and other students (see also Swan, 2002). As the opportunities of online teaching increase alongside demand for it, it is important to know student perceptions and experiences widely. In addition, we wanted to know what kind of an online learning and teaching environment would be ideal according to students’ opinions from the perspectives of caring teaching and positive interaction.

2. Positive Education

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in the application of positive psychology in schools and education (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009; Waters, 2011). Seligman launched the concept of positive education to combine traditional knowledge and skills with the teaching of well-being and good character (Seligman et al., 2009). The idea of positive education is based on the view that well-being skills—such as skills and modes of thinking with which students can build positive emotional experiences, strengthen human relationships, employ their strengths, boost their perseverance, and lead them toward healthy and happy lives while also promoting learning and success in studies (Bernard & Walton, 2011).

Demanding study life at universities makes an excellent context to test and realize positive education (Oades, Robinson, Green, & Spence, 2011). Positive education can decrease depression and anxiety in students and increase their life satisfaction, learning, and creative thinking (Seligman et al., 2009). According to various research, promotion of well-being in students may benefit the development of their academic skills and readiness in many ways (Norrish, Williams, O’Connor, & Robinson, 2013). For example, the use of signature strengths has been noted to be at least equally as important to school performances as cognitive skills (Linkins, Niemiec, Gillham, & Mayerson, 2015). People with high levels of well-being succeed better in various areas of life, such as school, work, social relationships, health, and financially, too (e.g., Cohn & Fredrickson, 2009; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Positive moods and emotions help students to act, feel, and think in ways that strengthen necessary resources and help goal-achievements (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

Well-being is a multidimensional phenomenon that can be defined by listing various

emotional, psychological, and social dimensions (see e.g., Keyes, 2007, Rath & Harter, 2010; Ryff, 1989). According to Seligman's (2011) PERMA-theory, well-being is a construct of five independent and measurable elements: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievements. Positive emotions refer to hedonistic feelings such as happiness, pleasure, and comfort (Kern, Waters, Adler, & White, 2015). Engagement means well-being that one experiences in moments of deep interest or absorption in one's activities (Kern et al., 2015), such as flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Building positive relationships as the element of well-being is one of the core prerequisites of well-being (Seligman, 2011): social support, being cared, appreciated, and loved by others is important to everyone in all cultures (Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern, & Seligman, 2011). Meaning refers to a sense of purpose in life (Kern et al., 2015) that is, to a great extent, based on one's awareness of strengths and ability to use them (e.g., Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007). Achievements mean success, good performances and accomplishments that people pursue regardless of other factors or elements of well-being (Seligman, 2011), but quite often, achieving also leads to positive emotions and even flow (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015).

Positive education can be realized by paying attention to the elements of PERMA theory. One of the most famous educational uses of the theory is the Geelong Grammar School in Australia (Norrish, 2015). The elements of well-being are integrated in the everyday life at school on three levels: (1) "Live it" means that the school personnel has adopted well-being skills as a part of their life style and thus set an authentic example to the students. (2) "Teach it" refers to active teaching of well-being both explicitly as certain contents in lessons and implicitly as an integrated part of curriculum of all school subjects. (3) "Embed it" means that well-being is widely included in all activities in the school community, which promotes the development of culture of well-being among students, school personnel, parents, and the surrounding community (Norrish, 2015). PERMA theory can be used for promoting and measuring well-being in university contexts, too (see e.g., Coffey, Wray-Lake, Mashek, & Branand, 2016; Lambert D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2016; Oades et al., 2011; Slavin, Schindler, Chibnall, Fendell, & Shoss, 2012).

Caring teaching is closely connected to positive education. Caring teaching is based on the teacher's pedagogical love and has emphasis on the teacher's important task of not only make learning in students possible but also to enhance well-being and happiness (Uusiautti, Määttä, & Määttä, 2013). Caring teaching is a somewhat wider concept than, for example, skilled teaching: caring teachers are interested in their competence and teaching skills (such as their ability to use online teaching systems efficiently) but in addition, their teacher character includes the certain positive attitude toward learners (see also van Manen, 1991). Caring teaching means a teacher's positive, caring, and encouraging attitude, which is shown as a trust in students' abilities and genuine willingness to design teaching so that students are likely to experience satisfaction, motivation, and positive self-image as learners (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2014; Uusiautti et al., 2013).

3. Method

The purpose of this study was to find out how university students describe their experiences of online teaching. The following research questions were set for this study:

- (1) Which factors enhance learning in online teaching according to university students' perceptions?
- (2) Which factors hinder learning in online teaching according to university students' perceptions?
- (3) What are the special features of successful interaction in online teaching according to university students' perceptions?

Since the purpose was to hear students' voices, a qualitative research approach was considered the best in this study (Creswell, 2009). The data were collected in the fall 2016 among university students of educational psychology. They were asked to fill out an online questionnaire about online teaching and learning environments. Of the 101 students 34 (29 women and 5 men, aged 20–52, mean age 29.9 years) participated in the study. Since the course was open to graduate students of the University of Lapland and students from the Open University at the University of Lapland, the mean age of participants was relatively high. However, the number of women and men represented the overall situation among students of educational psychology well. All participants had previous experiences of online teaching and, thus, they could be considered suitable participants in the study.

The data collection method was a qualitative questionnaire that consisted of five main open-ended questions. The questionnaire was an online questionnaire (provided by Webropol online research tool) to which the participants received a link and request to participate from the teacher of the course. They received the link via email and from an online study environment called "Optima". Students could choose whether they wanted to participate or not, and they could answer the questionnaire anonymously. Their personal details were not asked at any point of the data collection procedure. The questionnaire presented one question at a time, and the participants had to answer something before they could see the next question. However, it was possible to quit or return to the questionnaire later.

Since the students in the course were not met face-to-face at any point, an online questionnaire was considered to be the most convenient way of recruiting participants compared to interviews (deMarrais, 2004). Online questionnaires have the advantage of allowing participants to answer freely and anonymously, but there is also the danger of not knowing whether the person answering is the one originally recruited. In addition, collecting answers in writing may place those who are naturally good writers in a better position. However, in this research, all participants were university students who are expected to be familiar with writing long answers.

The participants were encouraged to write freely about their experiences, perceptions, and opinions about online teaching. The concept of online teaching was not defined or specified but the students could describe in what kinds of courses they had participated and how they

were arranged. Based on the descriptions, most of the students had participated in courses with online lectures that could be watched from their own computer, laptop, tablet, or smart phone. Some courses had included short tasks (such as writing tasks) and other independent studies (such as familiarization with course literature). Some courses had online group work, too. Basically, online teaching referred to online lecturing that could but did not necessarily include interactive tasks during lessons.

After background questions (age, experience with online teaching), they were asked to describe positive learning experiences that promote learning in online teaching. If they had any, they were prompted to describe how the course was designed, what happened in the course, what features made learning positive, etc.). The second question was focused on negative experiences that hinder learning through online teaching, and students were asked to tell what features led to negative experiences. Third, they were asked to describe how they would develop online teaching based on their own experiences. The fourth theme covered interaction in online teaching with (a) the teacher and (b) other students. The students were asked to describe the special features of interaction (what the interaction is like) in online teaching, and this question did not include any implications about the nature of interaction (e.g., positive or negative). The last main question asked what an ideal online teaching and learning environment would be like. The students could describe it based on their own experiences or they could imagine one and describe this. They were prompted with additional questions such as what makes the teaching and learning environment positive and what makes it meaningful to you. Finally, the students could write freely about their experiences or thoughts if they wanted to add something they considered important about the theme.

The data were analyzed with qualitative content analyzing method by categorizing items from the data and forming data-based categories, such as various elements of positive learning experiences (Mayring, 2000). Although the number of participants remained relatively low, the data appeared rich and relevant for the purposes of the research. It brought out students' practical experiences and based on them, it is possible to develop online teaching methods and increase meaningful study experiences among students in online courses.

In this study, the main question reliabilitywise is to analyze how openly the students wrote and described their experiences: as the data included a wide range of experiences—both positive and negative—about online teaching and learning environments, it was concluded that the data itself was appropriate and of high quality (Creswell, 2009). Analyses were made in a researcher team consisting of the authors of this study. In addition, excerpts from the data were included to show how students themselves described their perceptions and how interpretations were made. In this study, knowledge is considered socially constructed and dialogical (see also Salmela & Uusiautti, 2017), and therefore, the purpose of the study was to hear students' voices and compile a picture of the phenomenon based on their writings.

4. Results

4.1 Positive features that enhance learning in online teaching and learning

University students were consistent in their descriptions of positive and negative learning

experiences in online teaching. First, we will introduce the positive features students reported in this study.

4.1.1 Student-centered teaching and the teacher's enthusiasm

The most important positive factor was the teacher who paid attention to students in the online environment. This was mentioned by 15 students of 34 research participants in our data. The ways of paying attention included the ability to design a clear course content and guidance. Good planning was thus appreciated widely by students.

"It was a really good entity, in my opinion. The well-designed slides were visible all the time, we had the opportunity to participate in conversation and even ask in the middle of lecturing, the lecturer appeared in the real-time video the whole time. - - We had been given tasks to read before lectures and we discussed based on them." (Student no. 22)

"Teachers are able to use the online environment. The lectures are well planned, slides are short enough, and slides are also shared in the online learning environment, and thus they are available later on, too. Also other course materials are being shared in the online learning environment and available during the whole course." (Student no. 14)

Several students mentioned that it was good to see the teacher via online video connection. In addition, they had positive experiences of it because the teacher's own interest and enthusiasm about the subject could be better transmitted to students. This finding is similar to that of Stacey (2002), who found out that the teacher's "affective" behavior, including humor, emotion and self-disclosure, were a style of communication that appealed to students in online teaching.

4.1.2 Versatile interaction

In our data, positive teachers also showed caring by giving proper guidance about how to use the online classroom and other learning platforms. Likewise, during lectures and online teaching in general, students appreciated if the teacher could react, for example, to students' comments and questions in the chat window immediately. This increased their sense of participation but also enhanced interaction with the teacher and provided a feeling that the teacher really wanted to involve students in learning.

"In addition to slides and the teacher, the participants could comment in the chat window with their questions and opinions in real-time. What was especially nice was the teacher's good teaching style: calm and clear! Also her presence was all the time joyful and positive. Slides were clear, and the teacher complemented the slides with her speech!" (Student no. 11)

4.1.3 Peer interaction and learning

If the positive teacher's action was considered the most important feature of positive learning experiences in online teaching, the second most commonly mentioned feature (N=12) was interaction with others, peer students. Positive learning experiences happened in online courses where students were able to interact with each other during lessons in private chats or online group conversations. Some had experiences of online interaction before and after

lessons in special online discussion groups but often they did not include real-time conversations.

Most online learning environments allowed the teacher to divide participants into groups (randomly or not) and the groups could have their private discussions with microphones or in a group chat. Positive experiences included especially these kinds of discussions with peers:

“It was good that we could think about the issues together even though we were not in the same room. It was also positive that the teacher determined the groups. This way we had different kinds of viewpoints than usual, because usually in lectures [in the classroom] you do group work with the same peers.” (Student no. 26)

“I have positive experiences. - - Group discussions were new to me. A really good thing! More this!” (Student no. 7)

4.1.4 Opportunity to retain one’s privacy and anonymity

Sharing thoughts and opinions is therefore important to students, even if they participate in lessons “from their home couch in a nice position” (Student no. 22). Interestingly, students mentioned that the opportunity to be anonymous in the online learning environment could help open interaction and sharing of thoughts and ideas. While some would have preferred that students’ names and profile pictures were made available, some thought that participation anonymously in chats or other discussions increased their attention and voluntary participation.

“Discussion succeeded as well in the chat as—or even better than—in a normal lecture hall (Finnish people warm up slowly, and if there are no familiar people, no discussion will happen) anonymity in the online chat” (Student no. 9)

“In an online lecture, it is easier to express your opinions, and group discussions are more fluent because even we who are shy find it easy to type our opinion on some topic without drawing too much attention to ourselves. In addition, everyone can read the comment again because they are available in the comment box.” (Student no. 12)

Students clearly expressed their need for discussing the topics and themes with peers, in addition to with their teacher. Discussions were described as enjoyable, inspiring, and meaningful for learning.

4.1.5 Regardless of time and place

Other positive experiences from online teaching included the opportunity to participate in the course regardless of place (N=9 students mentioned this). Some were traveling by car or train, some were in their summer houses, some cooked and took care of children, or some just laid comfortably in their home sofas during online lectures. This advantage was quite expected among students from the University of Lapland: students come from across Finland and, even in Lapland, the distances between students’ homes and the university can be hundreds of miles. Wintertime is also hard. During the time of plenty of snow and minus zero degrees, students seemed to appreciate the chance of staying at home and not driving in hard

conditions to the university. Even though not all universities are located in places like the one in our example, this benefit is clear: students can also participate more actively, for example, if they are sick, and would not want to miss any lessons. Some students (N=8) had noticed that they participated more actively in lessons, too, in online teaching:

“Yes, I have positive experiences of online teaching. It allowed me to make an optimal space, make myself comfortable, have breaks and I could concentrate better than in an ordinary lesson.” (Student no. 5)

4.2 Negative features that hinder learning in online teaching

When the students were asked to list negative experiences of online learning environments, their answers were consistent with those that were previously presented.

4.2.1 Technical problems

However, the worst experiences were connected with technical problems (N=15 students). Weak connections and thus problems with video, pictures, and voice were considered annoying. However, the students had realized that more often than not the problems occurred in their own smart phones or computers and were issues that the teacher of the university could not control. Of course, technology of online teaching is improving all the time, and these questions as such are not relevant to discuss in detail in this paper.

4.2.2 Lack of interaction

Based on students' perceptions and experiences (N=8), lack of a peer group had caused many negative experiences with online teaching. As mentioned earlier, being able to interact with other students is invaluable even in online environments, and therefore, it was logical that lack of any interaction was mentioned as a negative experience.

“It was not so communal, because you could not see other students.” (Student no. 30)

“I considered it troublesome because the peer group was missing. We had some discussion in chat but it was still different than talking face-to-face.” (Student no. 8)

Likewise, six students had negative experiences of not being able to interact with the teacher. They reported about courses where they did not have a live picture of the lecturer and thus the teacher seemed distant. In some cases, the teacher had used a negative tone in interaction or the teacher had been passive and not responding to students' questions or comments. All these together—technical problems and lack of interaction with peers and teachers—were reported to decrease motivation and attention. However, they are also features that teachers cannot pay too much attention to when planning online courses.

“Online teaching itself is something that I do not like, because the teacher is not present, people are not present, the connection is lousy, you can hear some words but not all. Working online is downright nerve-wracking.” (Student no. 27)

The benefits and problems brought up by our students are somewhat similar with findings from other studies. For example, Bouhnik and Marcus (2006) listed particular factors that can

be used for predicting whether a student might drop out of, or otherwise fail to achieve satisfactory results in an online course. These were clarity of design, interaction with instructors, and active discussion in the context of the course; the lack of self-motivation and the inability to structure one's own learning; an absence of previous experience with distance learning; and forced participation in distance learning (see also Bouhnik & Marcus, 2006, p. 300).

4.3 Special features of positive interaction in online teaching and learning

As the students described, interaction with the teacher and other students became one of the most important issues in online teaching.

4.3.1 The teacher's multidimensional activity

When asking directly about their positive experiences of interaction with the teacher, students reported that in many courses interaction was instant, fluent, and positive. Some teachers had the ability to create a positive learning atmosphere also in online teaching, and encouraged students to participate and interact with their presence and willingness to hear students' opinions and comments. Of course, teachers differ from each other, and not everyone finds it easy to interact in an online environment. From a student's perspective, creating opportunities to become seen and heard also in an online learning environment is crucial and increases study motivation, and thus successful studying, too.

"[In a good course] the interaction is very good. The teacher seems to be aware of things, can have appropriate breaks and read students even remotely, and is not too official but when the teacher is open, it is easier to approach the teacher with questions." (Student no. 6)

"I dare to ask better in online teaching than, for example, in a lecture hall. Even though in a lecture hall the teacher is present in the same room, in the online environment the teacher feels closer." (Student no. 13)

The teacher can show his or her interest in students' learning and participation by commenting on their contributions and participation during online teaching. Students can be activated by encouraging them to share; for example, internet links they find relevant or interesting. The teacher's own activity becomes thus evident to students:

"The teacher had a real-time video of her so she felt more real. In addition to this, the teacher reacted to all chat messages the students sent during the lesson. However, it did not interrupt the lesson or take it to wrong direction. Every now and then, we watched things from the internet that the teacher had linked to us and we discussed them in the chat." (Student no. 24)

"Interaction [with the teacher] is good because in online teaching it is easier to discuss with the teacher via the online chat option. Many students may find it easier to ask something via chat than aloud during a normal lecture. In addition, we can share links to different interesting articles that everyone can check in their own pc." (Student no. 26)

Some students had found interaction with the teacher superficial. However, based on the

findings from this data, the teacher's ability to engage students in learning in different ways can be the basis of successful online teaching and learning.

4.3.2 Interaction between students

Another major feature is, then, the interaction with peers. When students described their interaction with peers, the experiences varied from good and vivid to distant and weak. Those who had the latter type of experiences had participated mainly in online teaching where there were no opportunities to interact with other students. Here, the positive experiences are interesting: students found online, real-time group discussions pleasing and beneficial. They could share their thoughts anonymously or non-anonymously depending on a course, and learn about different viewpoints to topics presented in their courses.

"You can reach quite strong interaction during group discussions and working." (Student no. 17)

"Group discussions in chat. For me, this was totally new, this kind of discussion and I was a little slow but we had good conversation though. Other students also linked articles from the internet which gave us new viewpoints to the theme." (Student no. 24)

Chatting in online lessons can happen in an open chat window that is visible to all participants; in group chat windows that are visible to only group members; and as private chat that is visible only to those who are included in the private chat. Some students reported that they used the private chat option to talk to each other during an online lecture. This kind of activity can be compared to students' mutual whispering during a traditional lecture in a lecture hall. However, in an online environment, it is not visible to anyone else—not even the teacher—and does not disturb teaching. Perhaps, private chatting may increase students' sense of togetherness in an online teaching environment:

"Again I want to highlight group discussions as a good example. We do some commenting with peers in chat in our own bigger group. This chat makes it possible to share thoughts during a lecture with other students without such an interruption that 'whispering' with others during an ordinary lesson would do, even though 'whispering' was related to the theme." (Student no. 25)

5. Discussion: Ideal online teaching and learning environment

Based on our interpretation, an ideal online teaching and learning environment includes four main features: (1) an active, positive online teacher who shows caring for students and the quality of teaching; (2) opportunities for different levels of interaction with peers and the teacher; and (3) ability to study regardless of time and place; and (4) good, functional technical solutions and internet connections. When the students in this study were asked to describe an ideal online learning environment, they summoned up all the features they had brought up in other questions.

Naturally, students wished for good connections and well-working equipment that form the physical, or merely technological, basis for successful online studies. Good internet connections, functional technological solutions, and useful equipment form the so-called

starting point or foundation of all online teaching. After that, the rest of the main elements can properly take place and support each other reciprocally.

There are numerous handbooks and manuals that describe in detail how to create an online learning environment that is visually attractive, functional, and transmits all the necessary information to students in an optimal manner (e.g., Kearsly, 2000; Maor, 2003; White, 1999). Goodyear et al. (2001) listed the various roles an online teacher must adopt: content facilitator, technologist, designer, manager/administrator, process facilitator, advisor/counselor, assessor, and researcher. Each of these roles contributes to students' learning by taking various viewpoints to facilitating it. Thus, each role of an online teacher necessitates various competences. While some are rather technical in nature, others require deeper understanding about the teacher's opportunities and actions in the online teaching and learning environment.

From the perspective of this study, it is relevant to discuss the attitude that the teacher must adopt when teaching online. The teacher may ask himself or herself, among others, the following questions: How do I make sure that students find me easily approachable and present in an online teaching situation? How can I encourage students to interact not only with me but also with each other? How should I provide opportunities for positive interaction and create a positive online learning atmosphere? As in any teaching, the teacher must pay attention to different learners as well as he or she can and provide support to those who need it the most.

Actually, "social presence is one of the most significant factors in improving instructional effectiveness and building a sense of community" in education, says Steven R. Aragon (2003, p. 57). Positive, social presence lays the foundation to and premises for a positive interaction in online teaching.

Online teaching can be compared to the so-called mass lectures. In this study, it became evident that students need positive interaction with the teacher and peers. That was emphasized in every students' answer in our data at some point. However, interaction is not very active or reciprocal in mass lectures either. In this sense, online teaching can provide even more opportunities to share thoughts and opinions with peer students or even with the teacher. In private chats, student interaction may, indeed, become vivid and reciprocal!

This was also noted by Greg Kearsly almost 17 years ago. He noted that online teaching in virtual classrooms is very different from a traditional lecture hall but the teacher's ability to use interaction-related tools variedly in online teaching can positively influence the success and the satisfaction of the students who participant in these kinds of courses (Kearsly, 2000; see also Bouhnik & Marcus, 2006; Tian et al., 2011).

Creating opportunities to interact with the teacher and peers is crucial, but at the same time, dependent on the teacher's caring attitude and ability to form a dynamic atmosphere in online teaching and collaboration. While it is important to pay special attention how the core content is presented in the courses and how to make students learn the required content well, it also seemed that the positive interaction formed an important part of how meaningful students

found their learning experience online.

6. Conclusion

The aforementioned core findings of this study are similar to those earlier studies surveying university students' perceptions of good online teaching and learning. For example, Young's (2009) study found out that adapting to student needs, using meaningful examples, motivating students to do their best, facilitating the course effectively, delivering a valuable course, communicating effectively, and showing concern for student learning were the most important features of an effective online teaching environment according to students' opinions.

In their survey among online instructors and education, Kim and Bunk (2006) noted that online teaching will increase considerably, but the main questions of its realization include, for example, "how online learning can develop student collaboration and evaluation skills" and "expect to receive some sort of training and support from their institutions to be ready for online teaching, colleges and universities need to consider how they will respond to these needs" (p. 29). Clear guidelines and directions, well-planned courses, and timely feedback are necessary in any teaching but become accentuated in online teaching where the teacher has to put extra effort to have students engage and participate in lessons.

From the students' viewpoint, online teaching should not be provided at the expense of quality. For finding studying meaningful, this is crucial and was also mentioned in the data of this study. Young's (2009) study proved the same: students expect having challenging and worthwhile courses as the alternative to the traditional courses. They expect high-quality learning experiences, and therefore, the teacher's ability to design motivating online tasks and discussions, teach effectively, and enhance fluent interaction are to guarantee the quality of learning too (see also Maynes & Hatt, 2013).

Through active participation, learning also becomes more meaningful and provides positive experiences to students (see also Bosch, 2009; Silius, Miilumäki, Huhtamäki, Tebest, Meriläinen, & Pohjolainen, 2010; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2014). As the proportion of online courses increases in universities, their role in students' study success is becoming more and more important too (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2017).

In sum, the need for positive relationships, open interaction, and availability of support, from peers and teachers, are necessary in the times of efficiency pressures and increasing mobility and virtual communication. Despite many benefits, students also need face-to-face contacts, and online teaching cannot ever replace it totally. On the other hand, the importance of flexible interaction solutions in online and distance education has already been shown in numerous studies and described in detail (Wilson & Stacey, 2004). In all, having various methods available and complementing each other, it is possible to offer students flexible study paths with numerous chances of successful learning and studying.

Being aware that there are numerous ways of creating an online course, much consideration was not put on the actual realization of online teaching. Instead, the students' own voices, their descriptions of those features that made them enjoy online teaching and that provided

them with positive interaction experiences had the main emphasis in this study. When comparing to earlier studies of positive education, it seemed that similar elements provide positive experiences in online teaching and learning as in ordinary classroom teaching. Positive online learning includes the sense of meaning, reciprocal interaction, and flexible opportunities of using one's strengths—and all this made possible by a caring online teacher.

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