

**Student and Faculty Perceptions on Feedback in a Social Work Distance Education
Program**

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Even prior to the widespread shift to online delivery during the COVID 19 pandemic, distance learning in BSW and MSW social work education was growing, especially for graduate programs. The 2019 Annual Survey of Social Work Programs conducted by CSWE reveals that of the participating social work programs and schools, 47.7% of BSW programs and 62.23% of MSW programs offered hybrid options and 7.1% of BSW programs and 30.1% of MSW programs offered at least 90% of the degree online (CSWE, 2020). Online instruction requires learning new technologies (Clarke, 2013) and new pedagogical practices such as incorporating teaching, social, and cognitive presence in the online classroom (Bentley et al., 2015). To be effective, social work instructors must develop new ways of teaching when engaging students online (Creswell Báez et al., 2019; Schmidt et al., 2016) and this requires a reexamination of longstanding teaching efforts. Even the familiar routine of grading and delivering feedback needs to be reconsidered when moving from on-the-ground to online education. This qualitative study examines the value of feedback for social work faculty and MSW students within an entirely online MSW program.

The Role of Feedback in On-the-Ground Education

Before exploring the value of feedback in online social work education, it is worth reviewing how feedback is understood in traditional, on-the-ground educational settings. Instructor feedback is meant “to reduce discrepancies between current understandings and performance and the goal” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p.86). This definition aligns with the goal of formative feedback where students’ thinking and efforts are guided as they are learning but also includes summative feedback that evaluates a students work to determine whether or not

they have grasped the learning sufficiently (Heron, 2011). Consequently, feedback comprises an essential instructional activity. However, instructors differ in the method and quality of feedback they provide, and students differ in how effectively they use instructor feedback. In on-the-ground coursework this might happen during classroom interactions when an instructor answers a question or clarifies a student observation about a topic. The feedback may be delivered verbally to an entire class or may consist of written notes provided for individually submitted assignments.

Not all feedback is equal. Hattie and Timperley (2007) emphasize that the most effective feedback occurs when an instructor helps students broaden incomplete understanding into a developing mastery of a learning outcome by helping students reassess and expand their understanding. This stands in contrast to simply focusing on what a student is not grasping. Hattie and Timperley (2007) explore how feedback can focus on one of four levels: the task, the process, personal regulation, and the self. Feedback effectiveness has been found to vary by level as well as by the combination of levels. Hattie and Timperley (2007) identified feedback about both process and personal regulation as the most effective levels of feedback. Process feedback consists of instructor comments about the means in which a student completes an assignment. For instance, an instructor might recommend a student edit their writing before submission by first reading it aloud. Personal regulation feedback consists of comments about student time or resource management efforts needed to achieve learning outcomes. Evaluative feedback, which Hattie and Timperley (2007) identify as feedback about the task, consists of points earned for a grade and can reduce student motivation (as cited in Schinske & Tanner, 2014). Feedback about the self has been found to be least effective for increasing student learning outcomes (Hattie &

Timperley, 2007). At its most basic conceptualization, feedback about the self consists of congratulating the student on doing a good job.

Instructors and students recognize that student usage of feedback varies. Students might engage deeply with feedback, they might consider feedback useful only insofar as it provides ‘correct’ answers, or they might completely dismiss it. Indeed, Hattie and Timperley (2007) state that students avoid reading feedback when their submissions are poorly prepared. Rowe and Wood (2008) note that on-the-ground undergraduates differ in their preferences for feedback. Some students want feedback that prompts their deeper learning while other students desire feedback that clarifies incorrect answers and emphasizes student success.

Even when students seek feedback, student feedback literacy can vary (Carless & Boud, 2018). Feedback literacy, described by Carless and Boud (2018), consists of students’ capacity to locate and make use of instructor commentary. Instructors can strengthen feedback literacy by informing them about the nature of course feedback, where it is located, what it consists of, when it will be delivered, and how to use it to inform future work or assignments (Carless & Boud, 2018). Feedback literacy is fostered when there are multiple opportunities to incorporate feedback into assignments prior to evaluation (Malecka et al., 2020). Carless (2020a) also recommends using assignments that incorporate peer review and offering promising examples of student work can be methods of helping students learn the value and process of feedback. This feedback literacy training also helps students manage their emotional response to feedback (Carless & Boud, 2018). Defensive responses can reduce the impact of feedback when they become barriers to problem-solving for future improvement. When students recognize how feedback can help them, then they can use it more effectively. When students do not reflect on feedback, they miss opportunities for growth. Ideally feedback is not limited to specific

individual tasks, but is part of an ongoing dialogue that sharpens student learning over time through thoughtful assignment crafting- a ‘feedback spiral’ that can deepen and direct student understanding (Carless, 2019; Wehlburg, 2007). Feedback literacy can be a task for an entire program or department to foster in their students rather than leave it to individual instructors (Carless, 2019).

Role of Feedback in Online Education

Does the role of feedback vary in online classrooms? Best practices in delivering feedback in online courses emphasize the need for prompt feedback that provides information, recognizes effort, and outlines how students can improve their work (McGuire, 2017). Online feedback is best when it is personalized, detailed, and constructive (Rios et al., 2018; Steele & Holbeck, 2018). Researchers have identified positive relationships between student’s perception of the effectiveness of the feedback they received and their motivation in an online course (Li et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that different student personalities prefer different types of feedback, with extroverts for instance, particularly valuing feedback that recognizes their effort and ability (Zeichner, 2019).

In an investigation of student perceptions of unhelpful behaviors of online instructors, three of the five most frequent student concerns were focused on instructor timeliness (Vallade & Kaufman, 2018). Additionally, 18% expressed concerns about unfair grading, 10% expressed concerns about an instructor being late returning grades, and 8% identified a lack of feedback as a concern (Vallade & Kaufman, 2018). While these researchers report that online student concerns about receiving feedback and grades were similar to concerns of on-the-ground students, they also suggest that online students may place extra importance on feedback because it helps student orient their perceptions about an instructor’s personality (Vallade & Kaufman,

2018) and may suggest students are attempting to understand who their instructors are and how much their instructor cares about them.

Role of Feedback in Social Work Education

Feedback plays a central role in fostering the growth of social work students. In social work field education, feedback has been identified as assisting students to develop knowledge, skills, professional judgment, and capacity for self-reflection (Kourgiantakis et al., 2019). These authors noted that student feedback satisfaction increases when feedback is concrete, constructive, strengths-focused, and promptly delivered (Kourgiantakis et al., 2019). Therefore, effective feedback must be more than the unidirectional delivery of instructional remarks about content. Instead feedback should consist of a bidirectional communication loop between instructor and student where both instructor and student can negotiate a shared understanding of the students' progress and the means by which they can enhance their mastery of a subject. Bidirectional feedback creates a two-way street, so instead of only providing a student with feedback about their outcomes on an assignment, the instructor also asks the student to reflect on their feedback, ask questions, and discuss how they will use the feedback to improve their learning on the topic of concern, as well as any scaffolded content that is to be developed further in a course. However, within social work education, minimal research exists about the nature of this bidirectional communication loop between students and instructors' and their perception of the value of feedback in online courses.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study is to provide insight into how MSW students and instructors value feedback in online social work courses at a fully online Midwest MSW program. Three research questions guided this study: 1) What do instructors in an online MSW

program perceive to be the main purpose of providing feedback to students? 2) What do students in an online MSW program perceive to be the main reason that feedback is important? 3) What are the similarities and differences between faculty and student views about feedback?

In order to ascertain online social work educators' and MSW students' beliefs about feedback, content analyses were conducted on respective data sources to identify and categorize themes from responses to open-ended questions completed by MSW students and their instructors. Data collection took place in 2018-2019 at an entirely online MSW graduate program at a Midwest public university. Understanding student and faculty perspectives about the purpose that feedback serves can inform faculty about how to deliver feedback so that it best meets student needs.

Methods

Surveys were sent to all faculty and students taking classes in a Midwestern online MSW program during the Fall 2018 semester. This project was approved by a university institutional review board. The surveys for faculty and students were developed independently to tailor the data gathering from either the educator or student sample. One open-ended question in each survey invited respondents to reflect on the value of feedback. These questions were analyzed respectively to present both faculty and student perspectives on the purpose and importance of feedback.

Faculty Surveys

Surveys were employed to gather social work faculty perspective about feedback delivery to students in the entirely online MSW program. The surveys were distributed to all 28 faculty (including part time adjunct faculty and full time non-tenure track or tenured/ tenure track faculty) teaching in the Fall 2018 semester. Qualtrics survey links were sent out to the faculty's

email with an anonymized collection of data in August 2018 with two subsequent email reminders. Faculty were informed of the study in line with IRB protocols and confirmed agreement with participation in the survey. This was a purposive sample of faculty currently teaching in the program with voluntary participation. There was no additional incentive beyond sharing their perspective. Thirteen faculty members participated, representing a range of online teaching experience. Faculty respondents were primarily lectures or adjunct faculty in non-tenure track positions. See Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics of faculty survey respondents

	August 2018
Online Teaching Experience	13
Taught online 6 or more semesters	7
Taught online 4 to 5 semesters	4
Taught online 2-3 semesters	2
Taught online 1 semester	0
Professional Role	
Tenured or tenure track	1
Lecturer or academic specialist	5
Adjunct faculty	7
Teaching Focus	
Mainly a face to face instructor	2
Mainly an online instructor	8
Both a face to face and online instructor	3

Faculty were encouraged to share their views about feedback and the MSW program to gather the experience of faculty teaching in the online social work program and make improvements to the program. The anonymous surveys gathered faculty views on online teaching. Limited demographic questions were gathered, primarily around role and teaching experience, however racial and gender information was not collected to protect respondent privacy in this sample from a small pool. Respondents completed 17 closed-ended questions about teaching online and an open-ended question: *What is the main purpose of providing*

feedback to students? The open-ended responses were uploaded to Dedoose (Version **8.0.18**) for analysis.

Student Surveys

Students were invited to complete a survey about the MSW online program in order to gather their views about feedback. The students in the online MSW program participated from locations across the United States or beyond. During the program's history, students have participated from as many as 16 different time zones. In general, students are similar to overall "non-traditional" distance education students and their academic participation can vary over the course of a program based on the need to maintain employment, caregiving responsibilities, or a combination of these (Melkun, 2012). All students enrolled in the online MSW program in Fall 2018 were sent two email reminders to participate in the anonymous Qualtrics survey in December 2018 and January 2019. In addition to demographic information and closed ended questions about their experiences in the online MSW program, the students were asked open ended questions including: "*The main reason feedback is important is* (fill in the blank)." The open-ended responses were uploaded to Dedoose (Version **8.0.18**). Students who completed the surveys were entered into a drawing to receive one of five \$25 online gift cards, which were randomly distributed at the conclusion of data collection. The 129 respondents demonstrated a 46% response rate and included 120 females, 8 males and one student that identified themselves as non-binary. Students had a mean age of 31.73 that ranged from 22 – 61 years. This was a representative sample of this MSW online program but female views were overrepresented compared to MSW students nationally (CSWE, 2020). Racial demographics were not collected in this survey to help students feel their privacy was more ensured, but the demographics of the

MSW online program school were 73.6% White which is much less racially diverse than the MSW student body throughout the United States (CSWE, 2020).

Data Analysis

A content analysis was conducted using Dedoose (Version **8.0.18**) data analysis software. The researchers were guided by the four stages of content analysis: 1) decontextualization, 2) recontextualization, 3) categorization and 4) compilation (Bengtsson, 2016). At the decontextualization stage, the researchers read through the transcripts and developed conceptual codes to complete open coding (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The conceptual codes were compared to the original data to ensure that all aspects of the data have been covered in connection with the aim of the study. The conceptual codes were then condensed into broad clusters. Once broad categories were fully established the results were compiled. A manifest analysis approach was adopted to enable the researchers to stay closer to the original meaning and context of the data (Burnard, 1991). The use of data analysis software allowed the researchers to identify areas of most concern for students by observing the number of times each code was mentioned throughout the data.

Each survey was independently analyzed by one of the researchers. The three contributing researchers are all associated with the MSW online program where the students and instructors completed the surveys. Two of the researchers are faculty members who regularly teach with the program (one is the director) and the third is a doctoral student. While the faculty members have connections with the participating faculty and students, all submissions were anonymous. All researchers have had qualitative training and were interested in understanding the role feedback plays in social work pedagogy. Trustworthiness was established through discussion between researchers to refine and clarify themes. Areas of disagreement around theme

consolidation were reviewed and clarified. The results of each survey and comparisons between them are presented below.

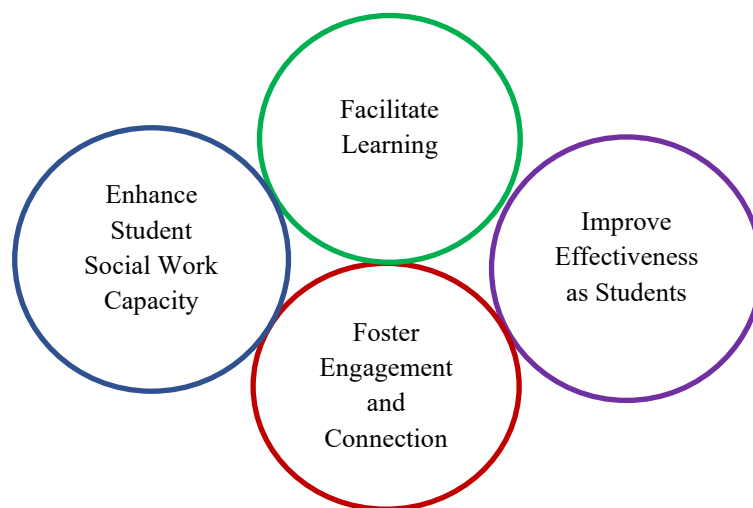
Results

The qualitative analyses revealed similarities between faculty and student perceptions on the importance and main purpose of feedback. Findings from each survey are presented separately and then merged in discussion.

Faculty Views on Feedback

A total of thirteen faculty members teaching across the MSW curriculum completed surveys demonstrating a breadth of teaching experience, professional role, and teaching focus. The thematic analysis approach broke down the responses into individualized concepts, labeled by content, and then organized into four larger themes in response to “What is the main purpose of feedback?”. These themes identified that these instructors perceived the main purpose of feedback is to 1) Facilitate Learning (8/13), 2) Improve Effectiveness as Students (5/13), 3) Enhance Student Social Work Capabilities (5/13), and 4) Foster Engagement and Connection (3/13). Figure 1 presents the interconnected nature of the themes.

Figure 1. Main purpose of feedback from online social work educator perspective



Facilitate Learning

Faculty discussed how their feedback served to facilitate learning (n=8, 61.5%) by inspiring reflection and critical thinking and helping students understand material more deeply. Feedback served as a way to improve student ability to meet course learning objectives. A few example quotes note how feedback can “encourage learning, challenge thinking, highlight key points,” “enhance critical thinking skills,” or “provide insight and open-ended questions to be thought provoking.” These ideas provided an umbrella for capturing how the instructors viewed their feedback as offering a way for students to grow in their conceptual understanding.

Improve Effectiveness as Students

Faculty expressed the notion that their feedback improved students' effectiveness as students (n=5, 38.5%). This theme centered on the value placed on helping students improve classwork, perform better on subsequent assignments, improve learning outcomes, and write better, as well as offer clarity on grading decisions. Comments such as “helping them improve for further assignments,” “improve their quality of writing,” or “They can perform better for the next assignment/ other courses.” Faculty believe that if students learn to be clearer and more thorough in their communication, then their capacity to effectively meet assignment expectations will increase and they will better meet course objectives.

Enhance Student Social Work Capabilities

When faculty identified that a main reason for feedback is to enhance student social work capability then their ideas centered on the longer career view for students (n=5, 38.5%). Faculty described that their feedback was focused on helping students perform better as social workers. Faculty noted that feedback provided “ways to improve their social work skills,” helped students “become. . . better social workers” or improve “clinical work.” Rather than inspiring general

learning or helping students improve in their role as students, these instructors are thinking about the end goal of helping students develop into social workers.

Foster Engagement and Connection

Some faculty identified connection as a main purpose of feedback (n=3; 23.1%). These faculty recognized that the feedback was a way to interact personally with students, keep them motivated, appreciate their work, and support their engagement and participation efforts. Examples included how feedback provided “engagement with course instructor as well as content,” helped to “enhance their participation in online class,” and feedback was valuable because it could “keep them engaged and motivated.”

[Figure 1]

Student Views on Feedback

Four themes were identified from the 129 student responses to the question “What is the main reason feedback is important?” The themes identified by students as the main reason feedback is important were 1) foster student development, 2) assess student progress, 3) clarify misunderstandings, and 4) facilitate interaction, communication, and develop connection with the professor. Some students indicated more than one theme; thus, percentages will not add up to 100. Each will be discussed in detail with exemplar quotes below.

Fosters Student Development

This theme of fostering student development is made up of two sub themes: 1) encouraging capacity for growth as students and social workers and 2) specifying areas of improvement. All of these comments were focused on student learning. Students recognized that the feedback played a role in helping them develop as professionals.

Encouraging Capacity for Growth as Students and Social Workers. The theme, ‘encouraging capacity for growth as students and social workers’ was mentioned a total of 99 times in the students’ responses making it the most frequently identified reason why feedback is important. According to the students, feedback provides them the opportunity to improve on their next assignment, gives them further insight into assignment aims, fosters critical thinking, and helps them to become better students. Students also mentioned that they learn from feedback and it helps them to improve their work quality in general. Below is a quote from one of the students “[feedback] allows me to grow as a student and a social worker. I use this as a positive aspect of my career, and it allows me to alter and learn from the work that I do.”

Specifying Areas of Improvement. For students to improve in their work it is vital that they know which areas need improvement. This subtheme was mentioned 65 times throughout the responses. According to the students, feedback is valuable because it highlights areas in which they need improvement and are doing well. One student attested that “it [feedback] helps me learn what I’m doing correctly, how I can improve, and what to think about for future assignment/projects”.

Assesses Student Progress

This theme of assessing progress was mentioned 50 times in the students’ responses. Students described that feedback allows them to assess their understanding of what they are being taught and their performance in the class. Feedback serves as a gauge for students and helps students to know whether they are mastering course content. A student posited that “without it[feedback] we don’t have any way to gauge our progress. I love knowing what good and what needs work was.”

Facilitates Interaction, Communication, and Connection with Professor

In the fourth theme, students noted that feedback is valuable because it fosters instructor-student interaction. This theme was mentioned 26 times. Students perceived feedback as important because it demonstrated interaction with the instructor and an opportunity to hold the instructor's attention. One student noted that "...feedback facilitates a dialogue...between me and my professor or peer. Receiving feedback lets me know that my work has been thoroughly reviewed and evaluated." The students also discussed that feedback helps them to know their instructor which is vital to them in their learning experience. Increased familiarity with the instructor helped the students to understand assignment, academic, and professional social work expectations. Students see the instructor's advanced experience in the academic field and social work profession as valuable to their own development. An exemplar direct quote from one student is presented below.

"It allows for me to see what the expectations are of the profession and the assignment. It provides good insight on the social work expectations overall and is important because it is coming from someone in the profession with higher education and experience than myself..."

Clarify Misunderstandings

This theme was mentioned by 10 times by the student respondents. The students who talked about this theme pointed out that feedback helps them to clarify misunderstandings in their learning and assess their understanding of course materials. They attested that feedback helps them to learn from their mistakes and to learn from other perspectives. Students are able to know how their instructors view their performance. One student quoted that

“... I use feedback in my self-evaluation papers, and as a way to know if I am understanding a particular concept, theory, or topic. Sometimes I think I understand a concept, but the professor gives me feedback to help me see the fallacies in my logic.”

Discussion

This research investigated the value of feedback within a totally online graduate social work program from faculty and student perspectives. Faculty provided perspective on the main purpose of providing feedback to students, while students provided perspective on the main reason feedback is important. There were several ways in which their perspectives merged in expected and unexpected ways.

Faculty Perspective

All four themes evident in the faculty perspective centered on student growth. The first three themes, facilitating learning, improving effectiveness as students, and enhancing future social work capacities, are closely intertwined concepts. They align with Hattie and Timperley's (2007) articulation that the purpose of feedback involves “reducing the discrepancy between current and desired understanding” (p 86). While each of the three themes have a similar focus in that they foster student development, they differ in emphasis. Some instructors emphasize nurturing deeper learners, students who are self-reflective and critical thinkers and other instructors emphasize training students to perform better in the classroom, write more clearly, and improve assignment completion. The last emphasis was on preparing students for their future social work careers (similar to Kourgiantakis and colleagues' 2019 model) and while these feedback goals are not mutually exclusive and unlikely to be in conflict, they may influence what an instructor will notice and critique in feedback. Since not all feedback is equally helpful to

students (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), there is value in assessing educators' beliefs about feedback.

The fourth theme recognized by the online instructors in this survey is that feedback fosters engagement and connection. This theme is distinct from Hattie and Timperley's (2007) proposition. Online social work instructors are not only reducing discrepancies and encouraging growth and development, but they are also motivating students, providing encouragement, and communicating interest. This is in keeping with research around online education in general (Li et al., 2020).

Student Perspective

Students articulated that feedback was important because it helped them to develop as students and social work professionals, taught them to assess their progress, clarify accurate understanding, and helped them feel connected to their instructors. This focus on student development and assessing progress again reflects Hattie and Timperley's (2007) argument about feedback serving to enhance correct understanding. However, students' verbalization that the interaction and connection with the professor facilitated by their feedback helps them to develop into professionals again differs from Hattie and Timperley's (2007) idea of feedback. This theme suggests that in addition to the cognitive domain, feedback is important for the affective domain of learning. Zeichner (2018) found this to be true demonstrating that online students who had both content and affect focused feedback tended to score higher on levels of motivation than students who only received content focused feedback. Like our student respondents, students in the study wanted more from their feedback than an accuracy check of the content. The students demonstrated greater achievement and motivation when instructors recognized their efforts and ability in addition to content commentary (Zeichner, 2018).

Merged Reflections on Online Social Work Feedback

Both the online faculty and students in this online MSW program recognized that feedback serves an important relational function. Instructors in this study were sensitized to how their feedback served a major communication role which aligns with evidence that online students are sensitive to instructors' unclear or unsupportive communication (Vallade & Kaufman, 2018). Students described feedback as a way of having the focused attention of an online instructor. A recent study of BSW students learning online during the COVID-19 pandemic described the students' desire to 'be known' by their professors and each other (Smoyer et al., 2020). This is likely that this is true for graduate social work students as well. The feedback might be a way that students feel themselves to be individually recognized, supported, and valued.

Feedback's amplified purpose in online social work education may reflect how instruction in online classrooms is more heavily reliant on interaction through delivery of feedback than in on-the-ground classrooms where interaction is more visually immediate and includes nonverbal communication. While Hattie and Timperley's early work minimized feedback about the self as contributing to learning outcomes, this personal feedback appears to play a more prominent role in terms of enhancing motivation and connection in online social work education. Having a more connected learning environment may foster more learning in the community. Online students may use feedback to make assumptions about instructor personality because they lack the physical proximity and greater sense of awareness of an instructor which occurs in on-the-ground classroom interactions. While online courses can provide a variety of options for faculty and student engagement, it is within assignment feedback that the instructor and student contact may be the most individualized. While exploring the contribution that audio

feedback can play for social work students, Knauf (2016) noted that it was the personal aspect of this that was so appreciated by online social work students emphasizing how they want “to feel some individual and personal connection with their teachers” (p.448). Audio or video feedback can communicate tone and emotion in a different way than words on a page do. Students might be more open to critique communicated with enthusiasm and affirmation when they can see or hear a professor than when they read written feedback and project a tone onto the words, especially if the online environment has limited student opportunity to get to know that professor.

One way to make sense of this expanded role of feedback in online social work courses is to consider the community of inquiry theoretical framework which is commonly used to guide thinking about effective distance education (Garrison & Akyol, 2013). The model includes three interlocking and overlapping elements: teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000). Teaching presence includes efforts around “design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction” (Garrison & Akyol, 2013, p.111) that happens in a course primarily by the instructor. Social presence reflects the “affective communication, open communication and group cohesion” (Garrison & Akyol, 2013, p.107) that occurs. Cognitive presence reflects the process individuals go through to reflect upon, critique, and internalize new perceptions. See Garrison & Akyol (2013) for complete description]. Each aspect can deepen the learning that happens in the online classroom.

The value of feedback in online social work education reflects both teaching presence and social presence which contribute to the students’ cognitive presence. Teaching presence is needed to foster social presence and cognitive presence (Garrison & Akyol, 2013) and involves pedagogical strategies that contribute to high quality courses (Oyarzun et al., 2018). Relevant

aspects of teaching presence include recognizing and addressing misunderstandings (Garrison & Akyol, 2013) and delivering timely feedback (Garrison et al., 2010). Teaching presence reflects the learning and growth focused aspects of feedback identified in the traditional literature by Hattie and Timperley (2007) as well as the value of feedback described by faculty and students in these surveys. Bentley et al. (2015) emphasize the need for online social work instructors to intentionally foster social presence in their classes as a way to motivate students. They note that how students get a sense of the ‘self’ of the instructor will influence their experience in the course. Some researchers have further delineated the concept of instructor social presence which includes expression of instructor persona and how the instructor communicates with students (Oyarzun et al., 2018; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). This concept of instructor social presence would also explain how feedback was valuable because of the personal connection it created between instructors and students. Feedback’s role in affecting connection and interaction between student and instructor may reflect both the teaching presence and instructor social presence aspects of a community of inquiry.

Limitations

These faculty and student views all come from the same online MSW program at one public university in the Midwest so students and faculty in different settings may have very different concerns, especially since online courses are structured in different ways which may influence how students perceive feedback. Primarily non tenure track faculty completed these surveys, and it is possible that this group predominantly would view the role of feedback differently than instructors who teach without that perspective. The fact that the student survey was predominantly completed by females is a limitation in that the results may not effectively represent and consider the views of people with different gender identities. Few student

demographics were collected in order to increase their comfort with responding. Because the surveys were conducted anonymously, member checks could not be conducted for verification.

Recommendations and Future Research

This study explores how feedback serves an expanded function in the world of online social work education. When faculty are providing comments about submissions and performance to students in these online formats it is vital to remember that extra effort may need to be put into ensuring a supportive tone and expressing personal interest in students even while addressing content and learning needs. Students may perceive tone from instructors based on their perceptions or projections of how an instructor is feeling or thinking about them. In the online format it can be a challenge to alter student perceptions. Departments may also focus on training educators to recognize their own feedback focus. This can help make explicit their implicit pedagogy and help them learn to recognize how their feedback focus might direct student growth. Educators focusing on preparing social workers to practice are likely responding differently to students than those focused on writing technique or general critical thinking.

Future research might verify if larger numbers of online faculty from more diverse social work settings concur about the purpose of feedback. Research can also clarify if there are differences in how faculty deliver feedback in face to face or online classes and if that is connected to different beliefs about student needs. Students might be asked how the connection with the professors assists them in their coursework and development and what online professors can do that best helps them to refine their skills and understanding.

Conclusion

Online social work faculty believed that the feedback they offered, served to encourage general learning, help students in their student role, develop social work capacity, and foster

connection. Students recognized that the reason for feedback is to facilitate their development, assess growth, and provide connection with their instructors. Carless (2020b) recommends feedback be understood as a collaborative process between student and teacher. This pedagogical framing of feedback may highlight opportunities for deep online learning fostered within a connected relationship. The more faculty can become sensitized to the expanded role that feedback serves in online social work education, the better they can deliver feedback that respects the relationship and fosters growth that is meaningful to the student.

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