

## **The Language of Students: How Students Label and Define Their Individual Class Experience**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Classroom experiences may be perceived differently by professors and students. Current evaluative tools are limited in the insights they provide about how and why students experience classes as they do. In an effort to understand how students perceive the class experience, a scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) inquiry was initiated. This study included interviewing 24 health and physical education undergraduate students, asking how they label and describe their individual class experience. Themes emerged focusing on the class environment, delivery methods, student involvement, and content applicability. The authors realized that these elements connect to the idea of flow in the classroom. Findings from this study share the student voice when discussing course evaluation and provide a new and valuable lens into the way students think and speak about their individual class experience.

*Keywords:* students' language, perceptions, individual class evaluation, class experience, classroom flow

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## INTRODUCTION

Every day in post-secondary institutions, hours are spent in classrooms with professors teaching and students learning—or so we think. As professors, we are expected to engage students in the learning process (Kuh, 2003), keep them entertained (Delaney et al., 2010), and impart wisdom. However, what professors see and describe as an effective class experience may be very different from how and why students experience and describe the class as they do.

As an instructor in a health and physical education program for more than 15 years, I (Julie) find there are days when I stare out into the class and think “Wow, this is really going well. Students are learning, or at least students are enjoying this class.” I think this because of the way the students are discussing the topic, asking questions, laughing at my jokes, or seeming to be engaged in the various class activities. Maybe the students are enjoying the class, learning the material, or maybe they are laughing at me. However, I have no evidence to support this thinking.

Wondering about this potential discrepancy between what the instructor perceives and what the students perceive, I initiated a scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) inquiry into teaching effectiveness to better understand how students perceive, label, and describe their class experiences on a micro or individual class level. An examination of current literature identifies a gap where little research is available in the area of individual class evaluation. Instead, most evaluation of instruction, such as the student evaluation of instruction (SEI) and student perception of teaching (SPoT), focuses on a whole course at its completion. Additionally, evaluative tools are developed at an administrative level and are not based on the language of students. In an effort to understand how students evaluate the individual class experience and to determine whether their perceptions are similar to or different from those of their instructors, I initiated a SoTL study by interviewing 24 students from various health and physical education classes. To start exploring this, I asked “How do students label and define their individual class experience?” This type of “what is” question, as defined by Hutchings, et al. (2011), is valuable in increasing instructor accountability and improving teaching and learning.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The many methods of student evaluation of instruction (SEI) are common practice in postsecondary institutions to enable students the opportunity to provide feedback on courses and evaluate their instructors. Student evaluations, whether focused on gathering feedback on instruction or feedback on a course more generally, are highly controversial (Boring et al., 2016; Deale, 2020; Esarey & Valdes, 2020). University courses are often evaluated at the end of the semester. The SPoT, for example, provides instructors with summative feedback on their overall course. For more immediate feedback, classroom assessment techniques (CATs) are a tool instructors can use to create a formative feedback loop between students and instructor (Angelo & Cross, 1993). CATs are a method to touch base with students, but more research is necessary to understand how checking in with students impacts teaching

effectiveness and student learning (Hanson & Florestano, 2020). Moreover, neither of these feedback methods compare student perceptions to those of their instructors.

Goodlad et al. (2018) suggest that students' and faculty members' self-perceptions and perceptions of the academic environment deeply influence the effectiveness of teaching and learning. They acknowledge that comparisons of students' and faculty members' perceptions offer potentially valuable information "for more effective faculty training and retention and for developing better informed teaching practices" (p. 131). Sojka et al. (2002) conducted a study on the perception of student evaluations of teaching (SET), examining the similarities and differences between faculty members and students. They found that students and faculty members differed on numerous points. For instance, faculty members believed that ratings increase the more entertaining the instructor; however, students disagreed with this point. The dichotomy in perceptions of the classroom may result from the difference in what professors see as effective teaching strategies and class experiences as compared to the student experience. These researchers also proposed suggestions for changes to SET frameworks, such as providing students with mid-term evaluations that are "used solely by the instructor and not made available to administrators" (Sojka et al., 2002, p. 47). This would allow students to evaluate the classes and see their requested changes reflected during the semester. Tanner (2011) suggests that effective teaching and learning results from reflective instructors "who are analytical about their practice and who make iterative instructional decisions based on evidence from the students sitting right in front of them" (p. 333). Flow experiences in the classroom can serve a similarly productive role. Researchers such as Csikszentmihalyi, Shernoff, and others have investigated multiple factors conducive to "collective flow" (Walker, 2010), including the instructional environment, the teacher's role, and the notion of individual and group work (Piniel & Albert, 2019).

A common criticism of SETs focuses on the lack of information gathered through course evaluations. SET critics and proponents may find that student evaluations created by students for students reveal more about students' learning experiences and perceptions of classes and professors than evaluations created by administration (Deale, 2020). Moreover, SET critics may be more comfortable offering students the opportunity to share their perceptions and evaluations if these evaluations are internal to the course and not used for tenure and promotion purposes (Esarey & Valdes, 2020).

Research studies have sought to examine how students and faculty members perceive a classroom experience (Deale, 2020; Goodlad et al., 2018). However, these studies tend to focus on a specific pedagogy or technique rather than a broader, open-ended discussion of similarities and differences in how students and professors perceive the classroom experience (Zabel & Heger, 2015). As described, the current literature focuses on the evaluation of classrooms (both formal and informal) and highlights the need to create an evaluation strategy that provides students with the opportunity to voice their feedback in their own language. Another condition of evaluation suggested by numerous scholars is that the student feedback be used for instructor development and not for promotion and tenure purposes (Gump, 2007; Sojka et al., 2002; Esarey & Valdes, 2020). This current study begins to address this gap in the literature by providing information on the language students use to define and label their individual class experience.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

This article presents information on the first phase of a multi-phase research project, which explores the language students use to label and define the individual class experience. The overall purpose of the research project is to develop a better understanding of how students and instructors experience and evaluate individual class experiences, and further, to see if students' perceptions and evaluations are similar to those of their instructors or where differences may occur. Insight about the similarities and differences between how students and instructors perceive and experience the classroom may help instructors adapt their practice to better meet the needs of their students.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This SoTL study aimed to better understand the language students use to label and describe the individual class experience. We followed Merriam and Tisdell's (2015) methods of basic qualitative research as an approach to researching "how people interpret their experiences" and "what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 24). To develop an understanding of the language students use to label and define their individual class experience, Julie conducted 24 one-on-one interviews with current university undergraduate students enrolled in a health and recreation degree. Research participants were asked to provide words they use to describe a class. More specifically, they were prompted with the following question: "When you walk out of a class and your friend asks you 'How was class?' what would you say?" Participants were then asked to elaborate on each of the words they stated and discuss whether they considered these words to be negative or positive. Each interview began with a review of consent information to ensure participants understood the purpose of the study and what was being asked of them. They were also asked to confirm their consent to participate in the interview. Interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes, after which the recordings were transcribed.

It is worth noting that the initial study design included focus groups, rather than interviews. However, days prior to the first focus group, COVID-19 caused the shutdown of in-person activities. Due to this, it was decided that individual interviews would be more effective than a virtual focus group. After receiving approval from the Human Research Ethics Board to change data collection methods and increase the potential pool of participants, a new recruitment letter was distributed.

## ANALYSIS

After data collection but prior to data analysis, a current undergraduate health and physical education student, Makayla, approached me (Julie) about completing a research practicum experience. While not planned, this turn of events strengthened this study in that a modified "Students as Partners" (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017) approach occurred in the data analysis and writing process of this study. Rather than the data only being examined from an instructor's point of view, it was also examined from a student perspective. This was

particularly helpful in this part of the study, which explores the language students use to describe their perceptions.

The data analysis process began with both researchers individually reading transcripts. Each of us would read the same transcript and come together to discuss any key words or statements that stood out. We did this for the first few transcripts to ensure that we were approaching the process in a similar manner and that discussions on initial findings were occurring in a timely fashion. Utilizing the method of structural coding as described in Saldaña (2016), we analyzed and coded the transcripts to categorize the labels students used. We then placed all common labels and descriptions in a large table to provide an image of the similarities and differences. After completing the table, we then identified themes for the similar codes. The four themes that emerged were “classroom environment,” “delivery,” “involvement,” and “applicability.” Each of these themes is described below.

## FINDINGS

### *Study Roots*

As data analysis was wrapping up, an image of a tree emerged for the researchers, with its roots grounding the research question and classroom experience, and the branches acting as the themes (see Table 1). This image resonated with the study in that students are an important part of the learning process and many instructors seek ways to connect students with the material, class climate, and teaching strategies.

Table 1: Themes associated positive and negative labels

Themes	Labels
Branch 1: Classroom Environment	Positive labels: relaxed, open, informative, awesome  Negative labels: awkward, closed, dull, challenging, dismissive
Branch 2: Delivery	Positive labels: engaging, enthused, passionate, balanced  Negative labels: capacity, heavy, jam-packed, complex, not helpful, unorganized, disorganized, boring, dull, unstructured, monotone

Branch 3:  Involvement	Positive labels: activities, fun, interactive, memorable, participating, engagement, enticing  Negative labels: frustrating, boring, suffocating
Branch 4:  Applicability	Positive labels: enlightening, exciting, interesting, informative, challenging  Negative labels: angry, useless, waste of time

### ***Branch 1: Classroom Environment***

The first theme to emerge as one of the four branches was labeled “classroom environment” (CE). Although CE is defined in the literature as a combination of social and physical qualities that create the student’s classroom experience (Ghosh, 2015), the research participants in this study primarily used language, or labels, that described the social qualities of the classroom. The social setting referred to the interactions between students and professors as well as between students and students.

Positive language focused on ideas of feeling comfortable, a sense of synergy with other students and the professor, and opportunities to hear a variety of perspectives and voices. “Relaxed” was a label used by Student #13, who described this feeling as one that “comes from the prof.” As this student continued,

so it is like when they are relaxed you are relaxed, and you don’t feel the pressure when they ask you questions you have to answer. Even when you get it wrong, like you are relaxed enough to still answer the question and be like, oh yeah, that totally made sense and now I will think of it this way.

Similarly, Student #19 used the label “open” and described the term as “having that open mindedness to everyone where it is okay to have different opinions and having that openness in the classroom.” The same student also discussed the energy in the room and explained that “it doesn’t just all lie on whoever is instructing .... There is sort of common feeling that everyone feels open to participating and people are active and engaging and talking, there is a lot more learning going on.” Student #11 used the label “informative” when describing feeling comfortable in the classroom and gave the example of “when you ask a question or you try and express you are struggling with something, and they [the professor] really try to get to the bottom of helping you.”

Experiencing a cordial environment may be the foundation of other positive labels, as the students’ descriptions articulate appreciation of organic and constructed opportunities for hearing the thoughts of their peers. “Awesome” was described as follows: “It wasn’t just the teacher talking; the whole class was engaged. Everyone was getting along, everyone was participating, everyone was learning together, and you know, it was just those classes where you really gel” (Student #12). The synergy Student #12 describes is a result of participation



from a majority of the students in the room. The professor has a key role in initiating the “awesome” classroom environment by encouraging engagement from all students.

Contrastingly, students also used and described negative labels as they discussed their perceptions of individual classes. These negative labels tended to describe the social atmosphere in the classroom, such as feeling uncomfortable, especially during quiet or silent periods. Some of the language students used included “awkward,” “closed,” “dull,” and “challenging.” “Awkward” was described by one student as follows:

The prof is asking something and no one is participating or asking something, and there are just kind of long, awkward silences .... Or, if you are split up into groups as well, everyone is kind of giving one-word answers and not really engaging that much. (Student #7)

Student #6 built on the perception of how a lack of responsiveness within the classroom creates an awkward environment, but they also explained that when the “conversation or lecture has got a little heated, or critical, has gone past the point of civil discussion” it can also create an awkward atmosphere. “Closed” was described as a “sort of environment where one feels they can’t speak up, or they are ashamed to ask questions” (Student #19). Student #15 echoes this student’s definition of closed; however, they use the label “dismissive” to describe an experience where the professor “shoot[s] down some responses.”

The label “challenging” was defined by Student #16 as “like strictness, I guess, just makes it more intimidating to ask questions and stuff, and less of an open, welcome environment.” This label was also explained by another student as follows:

Two ways, like based on materials or based on my own motivation .... [For example], maybe I didn’t sleep much the night before, or the week before I had a hard week in my personal life, so maybe it was challenging for me to be there, like I wasn’t in the right headspace to be in that class and be in that learning environment. (Student #21)

The first theme focused on the classroom environment, and we identified both positive and negative aspects. While different words may have been used to label this environment, what was clear in the descriptions was the importance that the environment plays in both the teaching and learning aspects of the in-class experience.

## ***Branch 2: Delivery***

The “delivery” branch emanates from the students’ perception that their classroom experience was predominantly the responsibility of the professor. Positive labels and language used by the students tended to describe the delivery of the lecture’s content and the professor’s ability or willingness to host an enjoyable performance.

Positive language was rooted in ideas around student engagement and facilitation, a sense of passion, confidence in their delivery of content, and the structure of the content. Students definitions of “engaging” included the professor’s cultivation of dialogue in the classroom, resulting in

[the] exchange of ideas and thoughts, and also debating to a certain degree, I find those to be the most engaging classes, and I take more away from those classes because I was engaged and therefore I will remember more of what we talked about. (Student #6) Another student defined engaging as follows:

It is something that takes my mind off just either looking at the notes or looking at the computer so I am not distracted, and I am more focused on what the professor is saying and more interested in the notes, so I am not just lolling off, or whatever. (Student #7)

Another student explained how the professor can facilitate engagement:

Getting us to engage as a class. There would be discussions in class, the teacher would spend a lot of time asking us things and what we think about things, so it is more like the instructor is very much engaged with the students, compared to an instructor that would just stand in front of the class and read off slides. (Student #3)

Student #4 blended the ideas of “engaging,” “enthused,” and “passionate” when explaining that engagement includes both the students’ involvement and connection to the material and also the “prof connecting with material, the prof connecting with students .... You can see they are also enthused about the content themselves and they are passionate about it.” This leads to the student thinking, “Yeah, I want to be part of that passion!” Student #24 defined “passion” as “enjoy[ing] what they are teaching on as well as be[ing] confident in themselves,” and Student #12 explained, “You can tell the teacher is really passionate about [the content], and the teacher really knows their stuff, and they are organized, and [the class] just really runs well.”

Organization played a role in a number of comments. One student explained that the professor’s organization of the class increased their confidence so “you could almost anticipate what was coming” (Student #24). Classes that contained a variety of activities were often described as “balanced.” Student #16, for example, described “balanced” as “the ways that the professors will structure the class and notes. So instead of just taking notes from a slide show there would be videos, or we would do something or class discussions.” More broadly, this term related to variety in how the content is delivered. For example, multiple students reported positive lecture experiences when videos, discussion, group work, and other methods were all incorporated into a single class.

Many transcripts revealed that students could easily articulate negative labels and descriptions of delivery. Negative language included perspectives about the amount of content delivered and delivery methods, such as the speed of delivery, platforms used, and a general staleness in the delivery, often leading to boredom. Students also mentioned confusion about the content’s connection to the course or degree and/or contradictions with other learning experiences. Labels quantifying the amount of content were two-fold. Some students described too much content while others discussed a lack of content. Student #9 used the label “capacity” to describe the latter situation and dissatisfaction with either the amount of content or the type of content. For instance, they described “capacity” as follows: “I felt like we could fit more information in, or I am a little frustrated that we are finishing twenty, thirty minutes early.... Like why are we not doing more examples?” Student #8 expressed dissatisfaction when “information that was repeated over, and over, and over again,



or whatever it might be, right? Information that might appear kind of common sense” (Student #8). On the other hand, labels like “heavy,” “jam-packed,” and “complex” were described as “way too much—like too many slides or too many examples, or an uneven distribution between examples and theory” (Student #21). Similarly, Student #13 described “jam-packed” as follows: “When you just spend a whole class trying to absorb 50 PowerPoint slides, it can be too much information.” This student also explained how a jam-packed class affects their other classes that day: “Like, if you have a class right after that, it can be hard to get back in that focused state because you just absorbed so much information.”

Student #16 used the label “complex” to describe “difficult or heavy content classes .... When there is a lot of content that you are learning in one lecture, I just find it is hard to understand everything” (Student #16). A distorted sense of time was a common theme in the negative labels about the quantity of content. For example, students mentioned classes that “lasted forever” (Student #3), in which “time went by really slow” (Student #14). Heavy content was also discussed under the labels of “not helpful.” Additional content was a source of confusion because “[the tangents] don’t really seem to have a clear connection to the course material” (Student #22).

Student #8 used the label “confusing” when the delivery did not communicate “a clear message as to what you are trying to get across that day,” and Student #20 mentioned being confused due to “conflicting facts, or conflicting interests maybe, that don’t totally align” with other classes or what other professors are saying. Parallel to confusion was the students’ perception of the professor’s organization. The label “unorganized” was described as “really adds a negative feeling to a class if it doesn’t have any real direction” (Student #1). Student #9, similarly, illustrated the label “disorganized” with the example of the professor “bouncing around from interface to interface, ... on Blackboard pulling up their slides, and then they are on the website, and then they are on YouTube.” Their negative perception of this disorganization stems from concern about how to review the course material at another time because

there were a lot of things up on the projector, and if I were to go back and review for that lecture I know it would be difficult because I wouldn’t be able to find, you know, just one slideshow with all the links and everything on it. (Student #9)

In addition to perceptions of delivery tools like PowerPoint, students also labeled their negative class experiences as “boring,” “dull,” “unstructured,” and “monotone,” and these labels focused on the professor’s role in “mak[ing] it a presentation” (Student #8). A description of boring was “like not interesting and the teacher didn’t make it ... keep your attention and I don’t feel like I am learning anything” (Student #12). Numerous students described both “boring” and “dull” as class delivery where the professor read off slides or from notes (Students #5, #11, #13, & #16). Multiple students described their label of “unstructured” in respect to the role of the professor during class discussions. For instance, Student #15 said

I think professors have a certain responsibility to be facilitators in conversation as well, or class conversation, and I think sometimes they ... they will sort of avoid that facilitator role and just kind of let the conversation fly between students.

A common label used by multiple students was “monotone”; however, the students’ descriptions of this term were broader than what the researchers would have assumed. Although some students described the label in respect to “tone of your voice” (Student #13) and “verbal cues and communication” (Student #18), other students described “monotone” as connected to the delivery method, such as a class in which

the prof is just reading off the slides, especially when they post the slides, too. It is really hard to pay attention because if they are just reading off the slides and not adding anything extra, you really didn’t have to be there that day, you could just find it online and read it yourself. (Student #5)

Students #13, #18, and #21 alluded to the extent to which both verbal and non-verbal communication influences a professor’s rapport with the class. Student #13 discussed the importance of “having that excitement in your voice sometimes, or even just like, ‘Good morning!’ something like that is a better start” to that day’s class. Student #18 mentioned that it can be helpful to “use equipment or behaviours that keep the class attentive.”

The “delivery” branch focuses mainly on the role of the professor in the classroom with regards to class design, delivery methods, and their ability to engage the students in the class. Interestingly, the next branch focuses more on the role students themselves play in the class experience.

### ***Branch 3: Involvement***

The “involvement” branch differs thematically from the delivery theme as the participants’ language reflected their own and their peers’ contributions to the class experience rather than focusing on the professor’s role. Students’ positive labels broadly described their interactions with their peers as well as their own ease of maintaining attention throughout the lecture. Although not a specific label articulated by students, “activities” and synonyms for this term were routinely discussed by participants. For instance, Student #5 described “fun” by explaining that it is “more of a doing aspect to class” (Student #5). Fun was a repeatedly illustrated in similar fashion to Student #5’s description, where students explained “fun” as “activities where it is fun to me ... and it doesn’t seem like a class where you are in a classroom setting and just listening to lectures, like that is an interesting, fun class” (Student #14) and “laughing and it is like a fun class, and it is like one of those activities ... Because it is not the normal class, it is an activity where you get to know your classmates more” (Student #2). Other students used a variety of labels including “interactive,” “memorable,” and “participating,” while still alluding to their physical involvement in the class. Student #3, when providing an example of an interactive class, mentioned having “gotten up and done an activity, or went somewhere, or like, we got up and the teacher got us to stand in certain corners of the room.” Similarly, Student #7 described “participating” as “either doing an activity or something maybe different than what we normally do so it sort of sticks out more.”

Many students offered their definitions of “engagement” as they reflected on their attention during the lecture. For example, Student #12 described “engaging” as when “you are actively learning, and actively paying attention and actively participating as a student.” Another similar explanation was “you are present and your attention is there” (Student #21). Student

#8 described “engagement” as “piquing peoples’ interest and hearing peers’ express their points of view and opinions.” This student elaborated on their description by explaining that either you learn something new, like either informationally, or it motivates you to kind of want to be more involved or learn more about it .... Some classes kind of motivate you to do something when you walk out, and I think those are the ones that kind of bring home the most when you think about a positive class.

Another label described by multiple students was “enticing,” as a result of classroom or group discussion. For example “when people are talking and there is a lot of dialogue and conversation going on..., it is enticing; the class goes by so quickly just because I am really enjoying myself” (Student #10).

“Frustrating,” “boring,” and “suffocating” were labels multiple participants used to describe negative class involvement. “Frustrating” was described by one student as their inability to get involved with the class, which led them to feeling a “little bit powerless as a student to speak up about, like, a delivery method that isn’t comfortable or helpful ..., feeling kind of powerless to change the situation” (Student #22). Another student described “boring” as follows:

When you leave and you are, like, I don’t remember any of the topics we just talked about because I zoned out for half of it. I was so bored and I am going to have to go home and pretty much relearn that myself. (Student #13)

Student #19 described “suffocating” as “none of that engagement, almost, you just sit and sort of listen,” which was opposite to their definition of memorable involvement.

A student’s role in the classroom is an important element in their enjoyment of the class, as well as their ability to understand, engage, and remember the material. It is not only up to the instructor to create a positive learning experience; rather, the students’ comments indicate an awareness of the role they themselves play as well as other students.

#### ***Branch 4: Applicability***

The fourth theme, “applicability,” focuses on participants’ perceptions of classroom experiences that are relevant to their lives outside of the classroom. The first three themes discussed in this paper demonstrate more in-depth discussion from students in the interviews. However, this final theme was also touched on multiple times by numerous students, making it worthy of discussion here. There were significantly more positive labels describing this theme than negative labels. Students’ positive labels stemmed from their perceptions that the lecture content and/or classroom dialogue was novel and enhanced their learning by evoking their curiosity.

Multiple students used the terms “enlightening,” “interesting,” and “intriguing.” Student #22 described content that was “enlightening” and “interesting” as “new concepts introduced in class or explained that I felt that I could apply outside of the classroom, to my life or just the world.” Student #6 described “enlightening” as content that helped them to become “more attuned to what is going on in our world,” while other students provided similar descriptions, such as “teaching you new things informationally and also getting you

motivated” (Student #8). Student #12 used the label “exciting” to explain “learning cool new things about the world around me, things that I never thought about.”

Similar to the interchangeable use of the labels “enlightening” and “exciting,” students often used “interesting” and “informative” interchangeably as well. Descriptions for these labels include “gets my critical thinking stimulated and going on a new topic that I have not experienced or [been] exposed to before” (Student #6); “content” (Student #10); and “current topics” (Student #13). Student #14 used “interesting” to describe “something I am passionate about, something that I will actually ... I don’t have to force myself to study and do work, I actually want to do work and study and learn about it.” An additional positive label included “challenging,” which Student #1 described as “new to explore” as well as an opportunity to “come to your own conclusion.” Student #9 explained this term as “Oh, I never thought of it like that,” and Student #19 mentioned “actually keeping the content relevant to the audience.” Another example of applicability comes from Student #10, who said “[I feel] super confident walking out of the class knowing that I am able to learn [a new concept], and I can apply it, and I will be ready for the next class or next test.”

Some students shared negative labels for this theme. Student #21 described “angry” as “lecture content not aligning with test content” while another student defined “useless” as “information that might appear kind of common sense” (Student #8). Another label used by multiple students was “waste of time.” Student #9 described this term in relation to classes in which “we were there and we went through the motions but nothing really stuck to me” while Student #8 explained that it was a “waste of time to be there and [I] already kind of knew that stuff.”

The final theme focused on the content delivered and its relevance or lack thereof to overall course content and other courses, as well as its applicability to life outside the classroom. Content that was seen as useful was, unsurprisingly, more enjoyable to the student experience while content that was seen as redundant or not new resulted in a negative student reaction.

The four themes uncovered in the first phase of this study provide a strong picture into what students see as important and not important in creating a positive class experience. The branches, grounded by the roots, share a glimpse of the language students use to label their experiences. While many different labels were shared during the interviews, it was clear there were common descriptions of some terms, leading to the four thematic branches.

## DISCUSSION

There are many components that contribute to a class experience: the instructor, students, content delivery and applicability, classroom environment, and opportunities for involvement. Findings from this study identify the various components that students perceive as contributing to a class experience being either positive or negative. The students interviewed discussed various words related to their classroom experiences, as well as providing descriptions for these terms. Notably, a positive or negative class experience is not exclusively dependent on the instructor. While it is important for the instructor to design and

deliver an organized and interesting class, the students, the environment, and the course content all play a role in students' perceptions of the class.

When examining the four branches associated with the individual class component, it is clear to see that if the content delivery was organized, the students were involved by asking questions, debating, and engaging in discussions, the environment was open and comfortable, and the content was accessible and relatable to the real world, then the class experience could be described as a flow experience. As we analyzed the data, we realized that the concept of "flow" was a useful lens to apply to the students' descriptions.

Flow is widely accepted as conducive to a positive learning experience (Guo et al., 2008; Kiili, 2005; Shernoff et al., 2003). The theory of flow involves multiple dimensions, including a state of full concentration, a sense that time is distorted, and an autotelic experience. The student interviewees repeatedly chose language to describe their classroom experiences that shared many similarities with the dimensions of flow. While flow is typically described as an individual experience, these participants frequently suggested that it was the professor's responsibility to enable their flow experiences. Recent research considers the social experience of flow or collective flow, and Walker (2010) indicates that individuals experience enhanced enjoyment when flow is experienced collectively rather than as a solitary experience. Furthermore, Csikszentmihalyi's (1975, 1988) theory of flow states three preconditions necessary to experience flow: the perceived balance of challenge and skill that the actor possesses, unambiguous feedback, and goal clarity. Many of the interviewees mentioned these same preconditions. Egbert (2003) developed a simplified model connecting flow to learning, demonstrating an interplay among individual learner characteristics and classroom contextual variables that influences individual psychological states, thus leading to flow. Contrary to Egbert's emphasis on the learner, instructors are acknowledged as part of the learning environment and have a perceivable impact on the student's psychological state and the achievement of flow. It has also been suggested that flow within a classroom can be contagious and can cross over from teacher to students (Culbertson et al., 2015).

Connecting flow, as a result of the four branches identified, to the university undergraduate classroom may be helpful as a method to increase positive classroom experiences for both students and professors. Findings from this study, along with the concept of flow, provide a framework for professors to consider when designing and delivering each individual class.

## CONCLUSION

The focus of this research was to uncover the language students use to label and define the individual class experience. The findings provide a new and valuable lens into the way students think and speak about their classroom experiences. Additionally, the findings from this study will be used to further this research to better understand student perceptions over the course of a semester and will also include instructor perceptions to allow for comparison between how students and professors evaluate individual class experiences.



This article contributes to existing literature in that it provides the voice of students when discussing course evaluation at the individual class level. It also connects flow and classroom experiences. Findings from the next phases will help students and instructors better understand the perception of the individual class experience using the language students use to describe classes, aid in course design and facilitating flow, and ultimately help instructors better understand how their class experience compares to how students perceive the class.

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