Understanding College Students' Perceptions of Effective Teaching

Connie Chuyun Hu
University of Kansas

The purpose of this study was to provide an integrated understanding of college students' perceptions of effective teaching centering on students' voices and learning experiences. Using a phenomenological approach, this study identified prominent attributes of effective teaching from interviews with undergraduate and graduate students at a Midwestern research university. The results concluded that a teacher-student relationship, engagement, and real-world experience are the most important qualities of effective teachers valued by students across disciplines and backgrounds. This study offers insight into teaching effectiveness and a useful guiding mechanism for teachers in developing a repertoire of effective teaching skills. This study recommends longitudinal research to understand how perceptions of effective teaching change as students mature and how their learning objectives and experiences shape and reshape the definition of teaching effectiveness. The study also suggests future research by looking into the comparisons between both students' and teachers' perceptions in order to gain a holistic understanding of effective teaching.

Great teachers deliver knowledge, facilitate discussions, and entertain students to promote enjoyment and motivation for learning by teaching effectively. "What is effective teaching?" is a decade old question among educational researchers and teachers. Effective teaching is hard to define and measure, and its definition varies greatly among students and teachers (Miron & Mevorach, 2014). As it is students' learning and academic future at stake, many believe that students should have the most influential voice in what is regarded as effective teaching (Alhija, 2017; Helterbran, 2008; Parpala, Ylanne, & Rytkonen, 2011). The most frequently used method to understand students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness is the analysis of responses gathered from student evaluations of teachers (SETs) or teacher evaluation forms (TEFs) (Huang & Lin, 2014; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007). Researchers have documented that the prominent characteristics of effective teaching are the interweaving of content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, as well as a better understanding and appreciation of the multifaceted nature of students (Allan, Clarke, & Jopling, 2009; Aregbeyen, 2010; Helterbran, 2008; Keeley, Christopher, & Buskist, 2012). More recent research on the personal qualities and behaviors of excellent teachers has painted a intriguing picture of what effective teaching looks like, as it is not possible to separate the concept of teaching as a process and the characteristics of a teacher as a subject (Alhija, 2017; Keeley, Smith, & Buskist, 2006; Keeley et al., 2012; Miron & Mevorach, 2014). Personal characteristics play an integral piece in the overall description of an effective teacher. Subject matter expertise, the ability to deliver knowledge, and personal characteristics all blend into the meaning of effective teaching (Helterbran, 2008).

However, an increasing trend in literature suggests that SETs and TEFs are systematically biased against female instructors (MacNell, Driscoll, & Hunt, 2015; Miller & Chamberlin, 2000; Mitchell & Martin, 2018), and responses to SETs are heavily influenced by students' conceptions of learning and other individual differences (Kember & Wong, 2000; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007). Onwuegbuzie and colleagues (2007) argued that even if scores yielded by evaluation forms are reliable, the validity of SETs and TEFs is in question and "this potential threat to validity is disturbing and warrants further research" (p. 151).

While there is a plethora of research, mostly quantitative on students' perceptions of effective teaching conducted by analyzing comments from SETs, TEFs, and online forums such as www.ratemyprofessors.com, not much scholarship can be found that explains college students' perceptions of effective teaching centering on their unique learning experiences and the short-term learning outcomes. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to provide an integrated understanding of effective teaching from students' own perspectives, learning objectives, and experiences without using the biased evaluation forms. This study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do college students define effective teaching?
2. What are the important characteristics college students seek in effective teachers?

To address the research questions, I used social constructivism as the philosophical lens to connect the role teachers play in establishing a collaborative learning environment and facilitating learning in a college classroom to students' perceptions of effective teaching. Knowledge is constructed within social contexts through interactions with a more knowledgeable other (teacher), and learning happens when the teacher facilitates collaboration among students (Vygotsky, 1980). The phenomenological approach was used to examine themes which emerged

from the interviews. The results concluded that some qualities of effective teachers are universal and valued across disciplines and students' backgrounds. This study recommends longitudinal research to understand how perceptions of effective teaching change as students mature and how their learning objectives and experiences shape and reshape the definition of teaching effectiveness. The study also suggests future research looking into the comparisons between both students' and teachers' perceptions in order to gain a holistic understanding of effective teaching.

Literature and Conceptual Framework

Adopting effective practices, teachers maximize the probability of students' engagement in learning. When students are more engaged, they tend to have greater academic and social success (Harbour, Evanovich, Sweigart, & Hughes, 2015). Emerging from the literature on effective teaching are two universal principles: (a) the technical aspect as it relates to knowledge and teaching pedagogy, and (b) the personal aspect as it refers to passion, the student-teacher relationship, and the personal qualities (Keeley et al., 2006; Keeley et al., 2012; Liu, Keeley, & Buskist, 2015; Liu, Keeley, & Buskist, 2016; Pan et al., 2009). The conceptual framework of this study was informed by literature in three areas: effective teaching attributes, effective teacher characteristics, and SETs, a biased approach to understanding students' perceptions of effective teaching.

Effective Teaching Attributes

Literature has identified content knowledge, teaching methods, and connections between theory and practice to be the most important qualities of effective teaching (Allan et al., 2009; Huang & Lin, 2014; Keeley et al., 2012; Kember & Wong, 2000; Korte, Lavin, & Davies, 2013; Layne, 2012; Liu et al., 2016; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007; Stronge, 2018; Stronge, Tucker, & Hindman, 2004).

Content Knowledge

Content knowledge refers to knowledge of the subject matter as well as a comprehensive understanding of other closely related disciplines (Anderson et al., 2012; Keeley et al., 2012; Layne, 2012; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007). Studies support that students across all cultures and disciplines place emphasis on their teachers being knowledgeable (Alhija, 2017; Keeley et al., 2012; Layne, 2012; Liu, Keeley, & Buskist, 2015; Liu et al., 2016; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007). Effective teachers demonstrate profound subject matter expertise, and

students hold a strong belief that content knowledge is a necessary attribute of an effective teacher (Allan et al., 2009; Miron & Mevorach, 2014). In order to transform complex concepts into comprehensible and easily manageable information and to deliver knowledge clearly, teachers must be experts in their fields.

Teaching Method

Content knowledge is important; the ability to deliver that knowledge is equally important (Helterbran, 2008). Appropriate use of an array of teaching techniques is regarded as a substantial part of effective teaching. Teaching techniques are defined as clear systematic step-by-step instruction, good organization of information, well-delivered presentation, multifaceted teaching, and active class discussion and participation (Alhija, 2017; Allan et al., 2009; Helterbran, 2008). One cannot separate teaching from learning when reviewing the definition of effective teaching. If teachers believe and support the concept of different learning styles among students, it is logical that teachers demonstrate varied teaching styles to promote student learning (Kember & Wong, 2000). Teaching in an understandable and clear manner is fundamental in delivering information effectively as well as in communicating to the expectations, learning goals, and anticipated outcomes to students (Alhija, 2017; Allan et al., 2009; Anderson et al., 2012, Azer, 2005; Helterbran, 2008; Revell & Wainwright, 2009). Miron and Mevorach (2014) examined the perceptions of good teaching among graduate students in education and reported that professors' teaching methods had a huge impact on students' advancement of critical and scientific thinking, especially first year graduate students. Effective teachers adapt to the various backgrounds of students, take different learning styles into account, and incorporate both into their lesson planning and teaching.

Connections between Theory and Practice

Effective teachers who are knowledgeable and adept at presenting knowledge clearly in an engaging fashion are those who can make connections between theory and practice for the students. The connections between theory and practice refer to the knowledge students take away from a class that is applicable to the real world, as well as relatable to students' future practice (Anderson et al., 2012). In the analysis of preservice teacher students' perceptions of effective teaching, Helterbran (2008) concluded that students were willing to put in the hard work when assignments and class activities were pertinent to the real world and applicable to future teaching. Literature that highlights the connection between theoretical knowledge and

future practice is especially pivotal for medical and education students. Medical students are expected to apply the knowledge learned in school to critical situations in patient care, whereas students in education need the theoretical knowledge to prepare lessons tailored to students' needs, to provide clear instructions, and to motivate students when placed in an actual classroom (Allan et al., 2009, Azer, 2005; Helterbran, 2008; Minor, Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, & James, 2002).

Effective Teacher Characteristics

James H. Stronge (2018) placed a focus on the teacher as a whole person "who brings to the classroom unique beliefs, values, attitudes, aspirations, motivations, knowledge, and skills, all rolled into one" (p. 3). What teachers do and how students perform intersect, making teachers a critical factor in determining student success because the teacher is the key in students' academic performance, school improvement, and quality education (Parpala et al., 2011; Riley, 1998; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). The most prominent traits found in an effective teacher in general belief and literature are approachability and respect (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2007; Delaney, Johnson, Johnson, & Treslan, 2010 ; Huang & Lin, 2014; Keeley et al, 2006; Keeley et al., 2012; Leibowitz, Schalkwyk, Ruiters, Farmer, & Adendorff, 2012; Liu et al., 2015).

Approachable

Students care the most about whether a teacher is approachable and understanding (Allan et al., 2009; Helterbran, 2008; Huang & Lin, 2014; Keeley et al., 2012; Layne, 2012; Liu et al., 2016; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007; Revell & Wainwright, 2009). For some students, the notion of approachability is linked to promoting self-efficacy and a trustful learning climate (Miron & Mevorach, 2014). Teachers who are approachable have the ability to create a rapport and a closer relationship with the class. The more approachable the teacher, the less intimidated the students feel about asking or answering questions and admitting when they do not understand a lesson or have difficulties completing assignments (Allan et al., 2009; Anderson et al., 2012; Azer, 2005; Helterbran, 2008; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Revell & Wainwright, 2009). Approachable teachers pay close attention to students' needs, relate to students on a personal level, and are sympathetic to the challenges students face (Allan et al., 2009; Keeley et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2016; Miron & Mevorach, 2014;Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007; Stronge, 2018). Teachers who genuinely care about each and every student show real interest in the student as a person and wants the student to succeed.

Respectful

An effective teacher is a teacher who respects students' different learning styles and opinions and treats each student as an equal individual (Allan et al., 2009; Azer, 2005; Cook-Sather et al., 2015; Korte et al., 2013; Miron & Mevorach, 2014). Keeley and colleagues (2006) defined a respectful teacher as someone who is always polite, does not humiliate or embarrass students in class, and never interrupts or talks down to students. The study conducted by Liu and colleagues (2016) using the Teacher Behaviors Checklist (TBC, Keeley et al., 2006) to understand Chinese students' perception of excellent teaching concluded that students across three disciplines (psychology, education, and chemical engineering) regarded respectfulness to be the most important personal trait. Showing respect to students is being ethical, and no teacher should take this characteristic lightly (Anderson et al., 2012; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007). As learning is an active process of constructing knowledge and making sense of the world, teachers are expected to provide a safe respectful learning environment with ample opportunities for students to share their knowledge and voice their concerns (Cook-Sather et al., 2015; Revell & Wainwright, 2009; Scarboro, 2012).

SETs- A Biased Approach to Understanding Students' Perceptions of Good Teaching

Evaluation forms such as SETs or TEFs have been commonly used instruments to examine students' opinions of effective teaching. However, a growing body of literature has suggested that SETs and TEFs are systematically biased against female instructors (MacNell et al., 2015; Miller & Chamberlin; 2000; Mitchell & Martin, 2018), and responses to SETs are heavily influenced by students' conceptions of learning and other individual differences (Kember & Wong, 2000; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007).

Gender Bias

Women in academia tend to be viewed as less competent and less accomplished than their male counterparts regardless of their actual capabilities and achievements (MacNell et al., 2015; Mitchell & Martin, 2018). MacNell and colleagues (2015) examined gender bias in SETs by falsifying the gender of assistant professors in a five-week online course held in a public four-year university. The results of the study showed that the male identity professor received higher scores than the female identity professor on all questions that measured effectiveness and personal traits. The purported female professor received much

lower ratings on the overall quality as a teacher in six of the 12 personal traits (promptness, fairness, enthusiasm, encouraging, professionalism, and respectful).

Mitchell and Martin (2018) conducted a study examining students' comments on their instructors from two different sources: the end-of-the-semester course evaluations and www.ratemyprofessors.com. The findings showed the male instructor received higher evaluations in every aspect except for administration in the identical online course. Female instructors were evaluated more on personal characteristics such as niceness, unapproachability, and physical appearance, whereas male instructors were evaluated more on intelligence and competence. Female instructors were referred as "teachers" more often by students while male instructors were referred more frequently as "professors" (Mitchell & Martin, 2018). This result resonates with the findings of Miller and Chamberlin's (2000) study that female instructors are devalued, and their status and credentials are less recognized and counted.

Other Biases and Inadequacies

Aside from being biased against female instructors, SETs and TEFs are not the most appropriate objective means to understand teaching effectiveness because the items in SETs and TEFs are defined vaguely and are subject to inconsistent interpretations. For example, students and faculty might view "keep[ing] the class interesting" differently. Professors may assume that varying teaching methods is the same as keeping the class interesting, whereas students might define an interesting class as one in which a professor often shares jokes (Helterbran, 2008; Parpala et al., 2011). Other students may consider a class interesting when the instructor incorporates various new technologies in teaching (Liu et al., 2015). The large variance in perspectives reinforces the need for clearly defined questions on surveys and evaluation forms and for caution in the interpretation of results (Layne, 2012).

Onwuegbuzie et al.'s (2007) study discovered that many individual differences – such as race, gender, years in school, preservice teacher status, and numbers of credit hours – exist with respect to students' perceptions of the characteristics of effective teachers. Their study concluded that female students tend to place more weight on student centeredness than do male students, and students with higher GPA's considered content knowledge and teachers' approachability more important. Moreover, a class with primarily Caucasian American students is more likely to positively assess the instructor's level of enthusiasm than a class made up of minority students (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007). Traditional questionnaires and evaluation forms may be biased against student-centered teaching and other innovative teaching methods as most questionnaires fail to relate descriptions of a variety of teaching approaches because they implicitly focus on the traditional style lecture (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007).

Kember and Wong (2000) stated that SETs are biased because of variables like class size, workload, and prior subject interest and experience. Other factors influencing perceptions of good teaching include students' backgrounds, and their beliefs about teaching and learning as opposed to those of the teachers. Kember and Wong (2000) concluded that students with an active learning focus judged these qualities to be important in effective teaching: stimulation of interest, promotion of interaction in class, and variety in teaching methods. Passive students, on the other hand, gave a lower rating to teachers who displayed these qualities in their teaching.

These are all factors suggesting the use of evaluation forms and questionnaires to be inadequate in understanding students' perceptions of effective teaching. To eliminate biases, differences in interpretation, and problematic assumptions, interviews designed with clearly defined and straight-forward questions are not only adequate but much needed. Taking the phenomenological approach, this study served as a direct investigation via interviews to delve into college students' perceptions of effective teaching through their unique learning experience (Giorgi, 1997; Giorgi, 2012).

Method

This phenomenological study centered on the voices of college students to understand teaching effectiveness from the perspectives of 14 participants and focused on achieving a sense of the meaning that each participant gave to his/her unique situations and learning outcomes (Merriam, 2002). A Midwestern research university was chosen as the primary site to collect data. Using random sampling (Marshall, 1996; Patton, 2005), all participants were self-selected as they showed interest in sharing their definition of effective teaching in a video-recorded interview. Participation was voluntary, and the students consented to their participation and the use of their real names and images. Gender and other potential biases were mitigated as students' perceptions of effective teaching were collected by way of interviews with clearly defined and straight-forward questions. Interview questions included, "Given your learning experience and objectives, what is effective teaching?," "What are your expectations of an effective teacher?," and "Have you had an effective teacher? Why do you consider him/her to be effective?"

Participants and Site

This study investigated students' perceptions of effective teaching at a Midwestern research university.

Table 1
Participants' Demographics

Demographics	Sample
Male	42.9%
Female	57.1%
Freshman	21.4%
Sophomore	14.3%
Junior	35.7%
Graduate Students	28.6%

Table 2
Participants' Backgrounds

Name	Race	Year of study	Field of study
Jacqueline	Caucasian	Freshman	Film
Jasmine	African American	Freshman	Secondary English Education
Jovaugn	African American	Freshman	Pre-Occupational Therapy
Marke	African American	Sophomore	Applied Behavioral Sciences
Regan	Caucasian	Sophomore	Applied Behavioral Sciences
Erika	Caucasian	Junior	Elementary Education
Haris	Hispanic	Junior	Business Analysis
Michael	Caucasian	Junior	Biochemistry
Parke	Native American	Junior	Secondary Education
Thomas	Caucasian	Junior	History
Feifei	Asian	Graduate student	Educational Administration
Junfu	Asian	Graduate student	Curriculum and Instruction
Katelynn	Caucasian	Graduate student	Latin American Studies
William	Caucasian	Graduate student	Higher Education

Three freshmen, two sophomores, five juniors, and four graduate students were recruited for this study. The participants represented a wide range of racial backgrounds and 13 different degree programs. Tables 1 and 2 show the demographics and background of the participants.

A few limitations must be mentioned. The first limitation is the relatively small sample size of fourteen participants ranging from freshmen to graduate students. Although the demographics were similar to the university's student body, no senior students were recruited. Two explanations to this limitation are the possibility that there happened to be very few senior students around the recruiting locations during the seven-week period and the nature of the self-selecting aspect of random sampling. The generalizability to the larger student population is limited to some extent and is disproportionate when considering the distribution of students across fields and years of study. However, based on the findings from this study in combination with existing literature on effective teaching (e.g., Keeley et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2016; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007), the qualities are likely to hold true across disciplines and students' background.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collecting process[1] began after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in Fall 2017. At 12 times over a seven-week period, a table with a poster was set up outside of the student union building and on a major road with high volume foot traffic on campus. The poster was designed to describe briefly the study purpose and to attract the attention of passersby. Interview participation was voluntary, and all participants agreed to use their real names and to sign a consent letter with an image release agreement. Informed consent was discussed thoroughly and agreed upon before the interview. Each of the 14 students participated in a seven- to nine-minute semi-structured video-recorded interview.

I adopted Van Manen's (2016) phenomenological approach to analyze participants' transcriptions. Each transcription was read thoroughly several times to

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[1] Two colleagues and the author collected data and carried out the first round of data analysis. Two investigators could not continue with the study, therefore the author carried on completing this study alone.

identify significant texts that directly pertain to students' experience of effective teaching. This approach allows meanings to be formulated from participants' own language (Gibbs, 2018). Themes common to all participants' transcriptions were emerged from the formulated meanings. Selective coding was used to determine the main themes and how they related to other subthemes (Glaser & Holton, 2004). In Vivo coding was used to highlight the voices of participants (Saldaña, 2015). I kept analytical memos after each interview and throughout the data analysis process to facilitate critical thinking about the data and to assist with documenting my thoughts and responses to each participant's feedback. These analytical memos played an important role in converting my perceptions and thoughts into a visible form that allowed deeper reflection and further manipulation (Maxwell, 2012).

Audit trail and thick description were used to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of collected data (Maxwell, 2012). An audit trail highlighted every step of data analysis that was taken in order to provide reasoning for decision making on the themes. Thick description illustrated that the study's findings might be applicable to other situations and contexts. Once transcriptions were completed, I confirmed the transcriptions' accuracy by comparing them with the interview video-clips several times and having participants read the interview summary.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that students from diverse backgrounds and fields shared similar views on teaching effectiveness and that the essential personal characteristics of good teachers are their desires both to learn and to be treated with respect. These are also the desires of all students. Both undergraduate and graduate students across 13 disciplines highlighted the importance of teachers' personal characteristics, teaching strategies, and adaptive teaching, as well as the meeting of students' learning needs. Some students believed teachers must engage students in order to be effective while others believed a lesson can be effective without actually engaging students in the process. Three overarching themes emerged from the data that encompassed all aspects of effective teaching that participants addressed in the interviews: teacher-student relationship, engagement, and real world experience.

Theme 1: Teacher-Student Relationship

"I don't want to feel like a number in any of my classes." – Jasmine.

Know the Students

The top overarching theme from the data was the teacher-student relationship. All 14 interviewees emphasized the importance of professors really getting to know the students and being involved in their learning. Developing a relationship with students starts with understanding their backgrounds because some teaching methods might not be effective for certain populations. When the instructors make the time and effort to understand students' learning needs and their life outside of the classroom, teaching methods and presentation skills can be adjusted to become more effective in the classroom. Without truly knowing the students and having a genuine interest in helping students to learn, teachers are not able to deliver knowledge effectively (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2007; Delaney et al., 2010; Keeley et al., 2006; Leibowitz et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2015; Stronge et al., 2004). Students stressed the importance of effective teachers who care about their learning and about the different ways people learn. "Effective teaching involves sitting down with your students and understand[ing] how people best learn. Because you care about any ways that students can learn and want students to learn," Regan explained. Jasmine elaborated on the vital role the teacher-student relationship plays in differentiating effective teaching from engaging teaching in her statement:

> I think effective teaching can be in almost any kind of situation when engagement is involved. The teacher has to definitely put in more outside responsibilities… to actually take the extra step forward. So you can be an effective teacher and I can get an A in class, but if you are not engaged [with] me and there is no personal bond, no personality then it is…ugh.

Michael gave a wonderful example of how his professor created a personal bond with students:

> He is very animated. He plays music in the beginning, and it is usually motivational. He plays motivational videos and kind of tells you that if you are struggling, it's okay. We are gonna get through this. And [he] just know[s] how to build a relationship with students. That is effective.

Respect

Effective teachers are respectful. As Jacqueline defined, "Effective teaching is to relate to your students at a deeper level to make teaching engaging and

effective while also being equally respectful to them as they (students) are to you." Being respectful to students and their opinions was a valuable personal trait identified in literature and was confirmed by the participants in this study to be an approach to building a trusting relationship with students (Cook-Sather et al., 2015; Revell & Wainwright, 2009; Scarboro, 2012). Jovaugn believed that a good teacher has to be a "people person and friendly" to build a real connection, a relationship with students. Parke said a good teacher is someone who "allows students to open up, speak their minds, and be themselves," while Junfu concurred, "The professor is really trying to listen to all the perspectives from international students and we feel valued in that class." Statements from these students further supported the evidence that effective teachers care about students' views and their contributions (Allan et al., 2009; Korte et al., 2013).

Approachability

Being approachable was another way to create rapport and relationships with students, and this was reiterated by the participants in this study and literature (Anderson et al., 2012; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Miron & Mevorach, 2014). Erika said, "[M]eeting with students outside of the classroom is very effective." Thomas shared the same sentiment by stating, "[P]rofessors would take the time to meet with students and now you would feel more intimate in the classroom setting." Jovaugn simply put it like this: "[J]ust be that person and try to have a bond with your class."

Understanding how students best learn, creating an intimate and safe learning space, being approachable, and respecting students as equals, as well as what they bring to class, builds the foundation of a positive teacher-student relationship. Teachers who aspire to be effective can start with making the effort to know the students, meeting students outside of class, and simply investing in their learning (Stronge et al., 2011).

Theme 2: Engagement

"Everybody in the process is engaged; everybody in the process is getting something from the other person." - Parke.

Participation and Group Work

Effective teaching is teaching with varied methods that engage and allow students to actively participate. Active participation means students engage in genuine and meaningful conversations and interact with both the teacher and peers. Participants in this study placed a high importance on engagement within the lesson and concluded that learning was more effective when they worked together in groups to solve problems and apply different theories to different contexts. William explained the following:

> Effective teaching is teaching that is engaging. I was a teacher for a little bit and the way I was taught was to present the information first, you know the PPP goals. You present the information, and you practice the information, and you produce the skills. Instead of having the teacher lecture the entire class.

Effective teaching does not happen when teachers pour information into students and make students take notes; it happens when students are allowed to share opinions and feedback and are involved throughout the process. Marke stressed the importance by way of this straightforward message, "If it is not engaging, it is not gonna be effective!" She further explained, "Not a lot of teachers facilitate discussions as they should, and that is another reason why lots of kids don't remember the things they are taught." It was clear from the participants that effective teaching requires presenting the concepts to students clearly, facilitating discussion, and providing interactive activities to allow students to take the knowledge and relate it back to themselves (Keeley et al., 2012; Layne, 2012).

To have an engaging class, teachers must know the subject matter well and prepare meaningful interesting materials and useful assignments that promote collaboration. Teachers should be "[e]ngaging the students in more hands-on activities instead of just lecturing and just PowerPoints and notes; I like to move around, work in groups… [J]ust have more of an interactive experience," said Erika. Erika's statement conformed with the literature in which PowerPoint presentations are viewed as unengaging and dull (Helterbran, 2008). Group work and discussion play a huge role in an engaging lesson, as Jovaugn explained:

> So breaking us into groups and the teacher just come[s] around and talk[s] to us, relating to what your teacher is saying and what your peers are saying, that really helps you engage and understand a little bit more. And you are more interested because you are getting opinions from people similar to you and peers… it is very effective.

Meaningful Use of Time

All four graduate student participants emphasized meaningful assignments. Junfu stated, "[D]esign assignments that are meaningful and [make] sure that they are not wasting our (students') time." Not only should assignments be a good use of students' time, but the execution of lecture or instruction should also be time effective. Students felt frustrated to sit through a long

dragged-out lecture or activity that could be completed in 20 minutes. William explained with frustration:

> I mean if you are looking at how much money it costs per hour per class, it is really difficult to think about those are my tuition dollar kind of going down the drain. I have a few classes like that in the past (chuckled then sighed).

Another notion related to time is flexibility. Time is precious, especially to graduate students because a majority of graduate students works full time and bears teaching and/or parenting responsibilities. Making good and meaningful use of time in and outside of class should be a consideration for teachers when designing activities and planning lessons. While asked about her general expectations of good teachers, Katelynn responded "I expect teachers to help me achieve the goals or the learning outcomes of the class, but they would be willing to work with me with a flexible time schedule. Just flexibility and willing to work with my schedule."

Learning is Mutual

Another important aspect of engagement to note was that learning is not a one-way street; teachers should feel comfortable learning from their students and not be fearful of making mistakes. Students and teachers both benefit from an engaging lesson. Parke expressed:

> Effective teaching to me is an engagement between the student and the teacher to the point where both of them become learners. It is supposed to be primarily from the teacher down to the student. But an effective teacher will also learn from the students so that that teacher may become better in the future. Do not be dogmatic in your lesson plan and your ways of presenting. Listen to your students because sometimes they know things that you don't.

Parke's statement aligns with social constructivism as learning is a reciprocal experience for both students and teacher (Vygotsky, 1978). Feifei explained how effective teaching means engaging teaching and how it could benefit teachers:

> Learning is not always fun (laughs). When the teaching and the learning is more engaging, I mean we must make it easier for our students to stay engaged and to get involved. And I think from teachers' perspectives, when the teaching is engaging it is easier to be fun, and it is easier for teachers to be enthusiastic and motivated to share their knowledge.

Feifei continued and reinforced the significance of teachers being knowledgeable and well prepared to deliver an effective engaging lesson with clear instruction. She also explained that effective teachers tailor their teaching strategies to different students' levels and even personalities. Adapting teaching methods to meet students' learning styles and needs is a prominent attribute identified in relevant studies (Allan et al., 2009; Kember & Wong, 2000). Effective teachers are able to incorporate various strategies to make their teaching lively by preparing engaging class activities which support collaboration among students and facilitating discussions (Keeley et al., 2006; Kember & Wong, 2000; Stronge et al., 2011). Making an effort to pay attention to students' needs and small adjustments in one's teaching strategy will make huge impacts on students' perceptions of the quality of one's teaching (Keeley et al., 2012).

Theme 3: Real World Experience

"Students are able to bring out what they have learned in class outside the classroom and future use." – Junfu

Theory and Textbook Connection

Connecting theory and textbook knowledge to real-world practice was highlighted by multiple students in the study. Effective teachers provide content that is relevant so that students can use it in real life situations. Michael emphasized the use of organic teaching materials to help make sense of what students are learning and to relate to real life experiences or matters that they deal with on a daily basis. Making the connection between now and future practice is also engaging and helpful for students to think critically. As Regan elaborated:

> The professor in my physiology class is very engaging. What she does is…she makes so many analogies and so many connections with the content that's new that we are learning with real life experiences. The way she communicates like I said, she just connects things with your real-life experience or makes analogies. I had another guy who taught me Chemistry, he was a GTA. Basically, he broke it down to the most basic level and built it up from there, not assuming that you knew every piece. And they both tailor lessons to students' learning and help us think outside the box.

Real Life Examples

Using interesting hands-on materials is an effective way to bring real-world experience into the classroom. Erika explained:

I currently have a class where we draw a lot of hands-on materials and it is great for my field, I am an elementary education major. We are actually doing the assignments that we would give to our students. So I am actually getting to learn how to facilitate it.

Haris told us that his business communication professor was passionate about her work and designed interesting real-life activities to keep her students engaged. Feifei further noted that the lessons connected to real-life situations were the ones that were most fundamentally engaging. Junfu's statement about meaningful assignments also highlighted the importance of the connecting theory to future application as useful assignments are those that do not waste students' time. This resonates with findings from Helterbran's (2008) study that students would put in extra time and effort when assignments were pertinent to the real world and applicable to future practice. Students are able to break out of the passive receiving mode of learning that they naturally fall into when teachers get them involved in meaningful discussions relevant to the real world (Keeley et al., 2012; Layne, 2012; Revell & Wainwright, 2009).

Students as a Knowledgeable Source

Having students provide information from real world examples was identified as an effective and engaging way to connect the classroom to the outside world. Parke described this method:

Say I have a young person from India in my government class. I can find out from them directly because they know how the government in India is set up, how it's run. Is it any different from the United States, is it similar? How? And then I can use that (example) in the next year or next semester as [a] comparative.

The above example simultaneously illustrates that ostensibly the teacher is not the only source of knowledge in a classroom and that learning is a two-way street. Respecting and making good use of students' knowledge benefits both teachers and students and has been suggested to be an integral part of becoming an effective teacher (Revell & Wainwright, 2009; Scarboro, 2012).

Other personal characteristics and qualities pinpointed in this study included teachers being passionate, being fair in grading, giving grades and feedback to students promptly, and setting clear learning goals. These attributes cohere with what has been identified in literature (Allan et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2015; Scarboro, 2012). Some believed that personal traits are inherent, but it is important to note that teachers can and should work on the technical aspect of teaching such as fair grading and adopting varied teaching methods in order to become truly effective.

Conclusion and Future Research

The use of a phenomenological approach to understanding college students' perceptions of effective teaching is scant in literature. This study is unique and significant in two ways. First, the study used the phenomenological approach, a method rarely used in literature on the topic, to understand college students' perceptions centering on students' own learning experience and short-term learning outcomes. Using individual perspectives and phenomenological analysis as the fulcrum, college students are positioned as experts on what constitutes effective teaching. Second, this study avoided the broadly defined language in course/teacher evaluation forms because students' comments were collected from clearly defined, straight-forward interview questions such as "Given your learning experience and objectives, what is effective teaching?" and "What are your expectations of an effective teacher?" The three overarching themes from the study included teacher-student relationship, engagement, and real-world experience, which addressed the two research questions of college students' definition of effective teaching and the prominent characteristics of effective teachers. The results of this study suggest a diverse palette of definitions of effective teaching. Focusing on the principles concluded from this study is a useful guiding mechanism for teachers in developing a repertoire of effective and engaging teaching skills as well as in reaching their full teaching potential.

Effective teaching matters. Teachers are facilitators of learning, the central reason for schools to exist. Competent, caring, and committed teachers are the most fundamental part in quality education (Riley, 1998; Stronge et al., 2011). Students' perceptions of effective teaching matter. As students continue to grow and learn, their perceptions of learning and good teaching change. Therefore, longitudinal research is recommended to examine how these perceptions develop and evolve over time and with more learning experiences, as well as how any residual effects also change with time and in light of more technological innovations in the classroom. Future researchers on the topic are advised to examine closely how individual differences, such as preferred learning styles and prior course experience, influence students' perceptions of effective teaching in order to gain a more holistic picture of teaching effectiveness. An in-depth comparison between the perceptions of effective teaching from both students and teachers is limited in literature and warrants future research. It is valuable

for administrators and course developers to orchestrate opportunities to provide professional developments for teachers based on the definitions of teaching effectiveness gleaned from research. Ultimately, an objective and thorough understanding of effective teaching benefits teachers, administrators, and most important of all, students.

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CONNIE CHUYUN HU is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies and a Graduate Teaching Assistant in the School of Education and the Department of East Asian Language and Culture at the University of Kansas. She teaches undergraduate level educational technology and Chinese courses. Connie's research focuses on issues related to student-teacher relationships, engagement in social networking sites, and mental health problems among doctoral students.