

# New Directions for Online Education Research: What Have We Overlooked?

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**Abstract:** As online higher education continues to expand, concerns persist around student isolation, attrition, and low interactivity, raising questions about its quality. This study conducts a critical review of online education literature, uncovering overlooked areas. Findings reveal that the lack of meaningful interpersonal relationships remains a key challenge, with learners' subjective experiences largely underexplored. This gap calls for research focused on the subjective aspects of interpersonal relationships in online teaching and learning in higher education contexts.

## Background

The widespread availability of online courses in higher education is poised to continue its upward trajectory. Despite its growing adoption, online learning often faces criticism as an inferior mode of education compared to traditional in-person instruction (Bakhmat et al., 2021). This perception is supported by studies showing that online education leads to problematic scenarios such as increased student isolation and attrition rates, skepticism toward student learning outcomes, and low student interactivity (e.g., Dumford & Miller, 2018; Rahmani et al., 2024). These data underscore a need for research that identifies overlooked areas in educational research to uncover new ways to improve the quality of online education, especially in post-secondary contexts. Aligned with that, this study examines the existing literature on online teaching and learning and proposes new directions for scholarly inquiry.

## Methods

This qualitative study examines issues pertaining to education and the dynamics of teaching and learning in digital environments through a critical review of the literature on online higher education. A critical literature review requires a rigorous evaluation of published materials based on their quality to identify conceptual contributions that either enhance existing theories or help derive new ones (Grant & Booth, 2009). The results of this investigation aim to advance online education research by building on past studies and proposing innovative paths for future exploration.

## Findings and Discussion

The data uncovered various challenges affecting online higher education effectiveness and accessibility, including technological, pedagogical, and infrastructural factors. Delving deeper into pedagogical issues, the study found they often stem from a lack of meaningful interpersonal relationships in digital settings. This is particularly relevant since the quality of interpersonal relationships with peers and instructors has long been identified as crucial for a successful (online) learning experience (Anderson, 2008; Leite, 2006).

The analysis of the literature on the dynamics and importance of interpersonal relationships in online higher education revealed that researchers tend to emphasize observable aspects of human activity in online environments, such as student participation in discussions (Dumford & Miller, 2018) and the provision of constructive feedback by teachers or peers (Dalziel, 2015). As a result, learners' subjective experiences and their role in the meaning-making process remain largely underexplored. This oversight highlights a critical gap in current frameworks, calling for a more comprehensive understanding of learners' subjective experiences to foster meaningful online learning environments and enhance post-secondary online education.

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