Vocational students' expectations as clients in tertiary education.

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Abstract:

In the past adult, vocational further education students enrolled in tertiary institutions saw themselves as mere students. Now, however, many see themselves as clients or customers of the institution. It would appear, therefore, to be reasonable to ascertain what their real expectations are as clients or customers of their teachers. While there have been a number of studies within the school system on this issue there is much less current data available from the tertiary education sector. This paper reports a study of vocational student and further education expectations of university teachers. It was conducted on five different student cohorts all studying for an education degree. The study showed that the student expectations of their teachers were mostly concerned with the traditional teaching and delivery functions. The students regarded communication skills, subject matter expertise, delivering relevant and current content, enthusiasm and professionalism as being highly important to them. The results of this study are congruent with those of recent studies by Trigwell (2001) and Sander (2000) in that the teaching function of university academics is still the chief concern of most students.

Background

Many adult students working in the field of vocational, further education and training currently enrolled in tertiary education are paying for the privilege of study at a university. They therefore, tend to see themselves as clients or customers of educational institutions. Sender, Stevenson, King and Coates (2000) have recently pointed out how these students are becoming increasingly aware of their "customer rights". Other workers in the field have seen tertiary education teachers including university teachers as "service providers", who need to be aware of the expectations of their "customers" when involved in a service transaction (Ziethhaml, Parasuramon & Berry 1990). They make the salient point that customers expect service that matches their expectations.

Research in the area of role expectations has played and continues to play an important role in psychology (eg. motivation, expectation effects) and more specifically in the business field (eg. marketing). Nonetheless, there is little recent published research in this area in the further and higher education field. Certainly, the issue historically has proved to be of greater interest in the area of school education. For example, Pithers (1998) summarised a range of studies in this area over the last 40 years, based on research evidence gathered about effective teaching role expectations from a range of students and other stakeholders. A link or connection has long been perceived between being an "effective" teacher and effective student learning. As well, clear relationships have now been established between student perceptions of assessment and approaches to learning. Of course, just what qualities an "effective teacher" may need or use in practice for this purpose has remained somewhat unclear over the years. The approach also is based on the assumption that the recipients of

instruction or the "customers" will be the best judges of what is required for "good" teaching and learning.

For example Paulios and Young (1968) listed desirable teacher roles such as inspirer, guide, role model, evaluator and emancipator. For Grace (1978), these were: excellence in social relationships, good knowledge of the subject-matter content and the curricula, as well as organisational ability. Gage (1971) lists factors such as: warmth, ability, cognitive organisation, orderliness and diagnostic ability. These factors, nonetheless, are all based on role expectations. These are expectations or judgements about how others think teaching professionals should think, judge and act, rather than their role identity or what they actually do in practice.

More recent research approaches in this area have attempted to examine those teaching techniques (eg. active practice, provision of feedback, monitoring) which were discovered to be linked positively to effective learning (Pithers, 1998). Nonetheless, these approaches still describe qualities or roles of teachers such as warmth, enthusiasm, knowledge, and business-like behaviour. (Cruickshank, Bennet & Metcalf, 1995).

Other work has been published which has looked at different aspects of student's expectations of teachers, often in the language and literacy field. For example Turkish students expected their teachers to display enthusiasm, assign tasks at an appropriate level, be aware of their needs, motivate and encourage them, be patient and friendly towards them as well as set clear goals (Turanli & Yildirium, 1999). Some workers in the field have pointed out the importance of such student expectations and how important it is to acknowledge and respond to them (eg. Anderson & McCoy, 1997; Harmann, 1993). Further work in the area has suggested that students often think that current teachers will be like previous teachers (Kennedy, 1999) and that student expectations of teachers and teaching can be strongly influenced by a teacher's gender (Ruzith, 1993).

Nevertheless, there appears to be a dearth of published work about tertiary students' expectations of their teachers and teaching and learning, when compared to the school education area. There are some useful recent reports in the tertiary sector. For example Fisher, Alder & Avasoli (1998) looked at the perceptions and role expectations of tertiary teaching by students and a group of tertiary educators. They were particularly concerned with the validity and reliability of the assessment of academic staff based on the use of reaction evaluation questionnaires (see Pithers & Holland 2001 for a review of studies in this area). Of relevance here was the overall finding that academic staff and tertiary students placed different importance on a range of different criteria. The teachers valued a range of roles in the social equity, independent learning and challenging the world view areas, whereas the students perceived different teacher roles were important. Role expectations of importance for the students in the Fisher *et al* (1998) study concerned factors such as social and effective communication skills (especially the "pace" and public speaking). They concerned content merit (especially explanatory skill), dynamism in presentation (especially enthusiasm), social equity (especially inclusivity), logical progression (especially summaries and session development) and some aspects of the instructional environment (especially the teacher being a role model).

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Fisher *et al* (1998) also pointed out that the divergence of opinions between academic staff and students possibility related to the intrinsically different roles each group possesses within the institutional system. They stressed the notion that the role of a tertiary student had become in many respects the role of a consumer. For students, their expectations were more likely to be built around their more immediate and instrumental concerns about their teachers and teaching. The teachers, however, appeared to see their roles more in the broader, longer term context of the institution and perceive their functions as providers of education and change. Furthermore, McKeachie (1986) has pointed to the fact that universities are increasingly composed of students with a broad range of academic skills and levels of preparation. This fact might be expected to lead to students who increasingly value the tertiary educator's role as teacher, presenter and role model, than do students who are more academically able.

Kember and Wong (2000) were also interested in the implications for evaluation from a study of student perceptions of teaching. Their interview transcripts taken from 55 Hong Kong undergraduate tertiary students indicated that students with active and passive beliefs about learning conceived quality in non-traditional and transmissive teaching, respectively. Their results suggested, in part, that students' role expectations of good teaching were biased by the students' conception of learning. More active learners' expectations of good teaching involved factors such as active engagement and varied multi-faceted teaching with understanding. More passive students as learners saw good teaching as involving organisation, clear information and structure, clear objectives, good pace, clarity of communication and the management of student workload and subject-matter content difficulty. The active learners also valued more highly factors such as the stimulation of interest, enthusiasm and the promotion of classroom interaction. These student expectations have a close congruence with those proposed by Trigwell (2001) in describing perceptions of good tertiary teaching and also those of Ramsden *et al* (Ramsden, 1995).

Sander *et al's* (2000) study of student's expectations of teaching also examined, in part, the qualities perceived to be those of a good tertiary teacher. Teaching skill was ranked by 395 undergraduate students from a range of disciplines as the most important quality, Teacher approachability was ranked second, knowledge third and then enthusiasm followed by organisation. These findings were reasonably stable across groups. However, other research has shown student expectations of their teachers to be biased by factors such as gender, age, type of institution, mode of study and culture (Kember & Wong 2000).

In spite of the problem of the reliability of student data in this area, Sander *et al* (2000) have suggested that student expectations are valuable data that should be collected and considered. This suggestion is taken up in the present study, where different groups of tertiary students, who were primarily vocational, further education teachers or trainers were asked to provide their role expectation about effective tertiary teaching and then rank these roles according to their perceived importance. These groups of students were composed of different cultural groups studying at the same university at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Overall outcomes were compared with those of other relevant studies such as Sander *et al* (2000)

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Method

Subjects

The sample of 126 students used was a sample of convenience. It was composed of different groups of students all presently studying at an Australian University but not necessarily on site in Australia. The total sample was made up of a subgroup of 25 Australian postgraduate students (age range 24–55). There were other subgroups made up of 27 Australian undergraduate students (age range 18–21), 22 Australian undergraduate students (age range 21–55), 16 Philippino postgraduate students (age range 25–40) and 52 Hong Kong Chinese postgraduate students (age range 25–45). All of the students were studying for a degree in the area of adult, vocational education, human resource development or training.

Procedure

The students were asked in their separate groups to brainstorm and make up a list of their roles expectations of 'good' tertiary teachers. These lists of role expectations were then subjected to reflection and each role/characteristic was given a ranking value of 1, 2 or 3. A ranking of 1 was signified as "highly important" whilst a 3 was signified as being of lowest importance (in relative terms).

Each member of the subgroups considered all of these roles/characteristics until a final group ranking given for each stated role/characteristic was agreed to by the total group. The data for each group was collected to allow for consideration of the overall roles expectations of all of these students as well as any between the different subgroups. The data was all gathered over a four-week period.

Results:

The results are shown separately for the student cohorts in Table 1.

Table 1. Student ranking of role expectations.

Hong Kong Student Postgraduate Group (N=52)

Ranking	Roles/Expectations	
1 (highly important)	Experienced/good academic background Subject matter specialist Shows relevance of material Effective communicator/presenter Professional in approach (as presenter)	
2 (important)	Leader	Structures material
	Coach	Good listener
	Mentor	Learner
	Flexible	Professional adviser
	Dynamic and enthusiastic	Analyst
	Creative	People developer
	Systematic skills	Promotes active learning
	Clear and precise	Good time management skills
	Facilitator/supporter	Understands student needs
	Problem solver	Organised

3 (less important)	Good administrator Observer Counsellor Actor/Entertainer Evaluator	Uses teaching aids effectively Choose appropriate teaching strategy for each level of student Researcher Good program designer

Australian Postgraduate Group (N=25)

Ranking	Roles/Expectations	
1 (highly important)	Professional Provides guidance Teaches course content Real world experience Creates and maintain interest	Knowledgeable Organised Respect learners Current Fair
2 (important)	Encourages high standards Approachable Facilitative Flexible Non-judgemental	Responds to students' needs Fair Interesting Enthusiastic
3 (less important)	Sense of humour Good listener	Engaging Opens learner's eyes

Philippines Postgraduate Group (N=16)

Ranking	Roles/Expectations	
1 (highly important)	Mastery of topic Love for learning Current Gives clear examples and illustrations Communicates well with audience	Credible Professional Good listener
2 (important)	Interactive and encourages participation Good time manager	Logical and organised
3 (less important)	Knows student by name Animated and creative	Presentable appearance Good sense of humour

Undergraduate Australian (School Leaver) Group N = 27

Ranking	Roles/Expectations	
1 (highly important)	Facilitator Clear communicator Marks assignments quickly Creates and maintain interest	Fair Attitude of equality Gives feedback Respects learners
2 (important)	Approachable Non-judgemental Allows discussion Interesting	Flexible Relevant content Not boring
3 (less important)	Use audio visual materials	Counsellor

Undergraduate Australian (Mature Age) Group N = 22

Ranking	Roles/Expectations	
1 (highly important)	Current in subject matter Real world experience Professional Enthusiastic	Well structured Good communicator Flexibility Relevant content
2 (important)	Responds to students' needs Inclusive Respects learners Provides quality materials	Fair Interesting Organised Non-judgemental
3 (less important)	Good time management skills Available	Sense of humour

Discussion:

An analysis of the obtained results indicated that the main role expectations of the tertiary students surveyed predominantly relate to the teachers' teaching and delivery function. As the students main contact with their teachers is in a classroom this is hardly surprising. The most important role expectations seem to be based on roles/characteristics such as being a clear communicator and being enthusiastic about the subject-matter content being taught. About having effective presentation skills, possessing subject matter expertise, being able to show the relevance of the content being delivered as well as being fair and flexible. This finding tends to show that many students may have a rather instrumentalist view of their tertiary teachers' roles. These findings are also in line with those obtained from other studies such as Trigwell (2001) and Sander *et al* (2000).

The results also suggest that adult vocational students still view the tertiary teacher as being an important source of knowledge and a transmitter of this knowledge. While the data is by no means conclusive, the obtained evidence indicated that many students still view learning in a tertiary institution as a fairly passive process. A place where the function of the university teacher is to present them with relevant, current content and materials rather than to challenge them to research, analyse and evaluate content for themselves. None of the groups put forward any roles or expectations that indicated that they see the tertiary teacher as being a person who challenges their world view. Nor one who equips them to facilitate the change process in their work or social environments. This was surprising finding considering most of the participants in the study work in the fields of vocational education and training or human resource development.

One notable difference that the study uncovered was a difference in perception between the two undergraduate groups. One undergraduate group was composed of recent school leavers (ages 18-21) while the other was composed of mature individuals with current workplace experience (ages 21–55). The younger group was similar to the other groups in placing a high degree of perceived importance on communication skills, facilitation skills and maintaining interest in the classroom but placed relatively little importance on the perceived technical currency and experience of the university teacher. School leavers have had little exposure to the world of work

and hence they are not in as good a position to make judgements about the criteria of technical currency and work experience as those who are currently or have recently been in the workforce. Similarly they are not able to make such informed judgements as is the case with the other groups, about the relevance of presented subject-matter content.

There was little, if any perceived difference in the expectations of the student groups in terms of social and cultural background. The three post-graduate subgroups composed of Australian, Hong Kong Chinese and Philippine students, primarily focussed on the same role expectations of the tertiary teachers, namely: communicator, current, relevant and professional. This is probably because in these subgroups most of the students involved in the study were employed in the human resources area by medium to large organisations.

This study suggests that if tertiary institutions are to provide a quality service to those they view as their clients and customers at least those with adult vocational and training or human resource backgrounds, then the employment of teachers who possess the characteristics outlined in this study is a necessity. It also suggests that these role expectations or characteristics should be given consideration when developing selection and promotion criteria for such teachers.

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