WHAT STUDENTS THINK ABOUT GOOD TEACHING: AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC*

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Background

During the past six years several descriptions of good teaching have been published [Ramsden (1992:96-103), HERDSA (1992), CAUT (1995:24)]. Ramsden identified six principles of effective teaching including, for example, concern and respect for students and student learning, ability to stimulate student interest in the subject, and clear explanation of the subject.

The annual survey of graduates conducted by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia uses the Course Experience Questionnaire that contains a number of scales describing good teaching. The scales were developed from research in student learning which identified the conditions that led to learning with understanding. Analysis of these surveys enables institutions in Australia and departments within those institutions to be rated on the quality of their teaching; see for example, Ainley and Long (1995).

The nature of good teaching has been further illuminated by research into teachers' conceptions of teaching, which showed a range of conceptions ranging from teaching as presenting information to teaching as ensuring understanding and learning [e.g. Martin and Balla (1990), Prosser, Trigwell and Taylor (1994)]. It has been possible to relate these different conceptions of teaching to the likely outcomes of student learning.

The statements of good teaching described above are all based on the assumption, developed from student learning research, that this kind of teaching will lead to 'meaningful' learning or learning with understanding. If this is the case then it would be important to encourage teaching of this nature. Furthermore, it is of great interest to know what are the students' perceptions of good teaching and whether they are widely different from those that lead to 'meaningful' learning. If they are then this could lead to unsatisfactory learning outcomes.

One striking example of differing perceptions of teaching is related by Perry (1988:149), who received two totally opposing evaluations from his students. One said "you've opened the world to me" while another, in the same class, accused him of being "the most dishonest, hypocritical and careless teacher I've had the misfortune to meet and Harvard pays you." The differences in perception in this instance related to the different stages of intellectual development reached by the students. These results have important implications for the use of student evaluations of teaching, particularly for review for promotion.

Van Rossum and Taylor (1987) examined the relation between student conceptions of learning and their opinions of good teaching. Students who held reproductive conceptions of the nature of learning (i.e. that learning was an increase in knowledge and skills often to be applied in different life situations) conceived teaching as 'closed' - i.e. they saw the teacher in control of all aspects of teaching. Those who held transforming conceptions of learning (i.e. learning was about making personal meaning and seeing the world differently) mostly saw teaching as 'open'. In this case the learner functions independently, with the facilitation of the teacher.

In an earlier study Van Rossum, Deijkers and Hamer (1985) asked students to write open answers to questions on learning such as 'what do you mean by learning?' In addition they asked students 'what do you mean by good teaching?' They were not only able to confirm the five conceptions of learning identified by Saljö (1979), but showed that students viewed good teaching as that which enabled them to learn in ways congruent with their conceptions of learning. Thus where students
perceived learning as ‘an increase of knowledge’ their conceptions of a
good teacher were a person who "clarifies everything", "who explains
well," which links well with being able to acquire knowledge. Those
students who sought understanding and meaning in their learning,
conceived a good teacher as one who provided independence for the
student in study and entered into dialogue with the student about
learning.

Questions of the Study

The exploratory study reported on here set out to answer three
questions:

1. What are the students’ views of good teaching?

2. Is there any difference in views of good teaching between first
   year (100-level) and final year (300-level) students?

3. Are there links between students’ views of good teaching and
   their conceptions of learning as had been found elsewhere by
   Van Rossum and Taylor (1987)?

Methodology

The University of the South Pacific has a departmental structure within
a School system. There are three Schools on the main campus in Fiji,
roughly corresponding to Humanities, Social Science and Science. One
100-level and one 300-level course were selected from the three
Schools, thus providing data on opinions about good teaching between
100 and 300-level students and also, if required, between the major
discipline areas. The latter possibility has not yet been explored.

A short open-ended questionnaire was prepared, asking the following
questions:

1. Describe what you mean by good teaching. (It may help if you
   think of the characteristics of a good teacher you have met)
2. How would you rate the teaching you have received at the U.S.P.? (Students were asked to respond on a five-point scale, from excellent to poor)

3. Do you think the teaching at the U.S.P. could be improved? (YES/NO)

4. If you have answered yes, please explain briefly how it could be improved.

5. What do you hope to learn from lectures?

6. If you have experienced any difficulties learning from lectures please explain them briefly.

7. What do you mean by learning i.e. what is learning for you?

Since it was not reasonable to expect staff to give up about twenty minutes of teaching time for the completion of the survey, a brief explanation of the purpose of the survey was given to the students at the beginning of a class and the forms were distributed with the request that they be returned the following week. This method, of course, inevitably resulted in low response rates, except in one class where the lecturer encouraged students to return the surveys on several occasions.

A total 39 100-level students and 64 300-level students responded to the survey. However, since this was an exploratory survey, the response rate and sampling technique was judged not to be of crucial importance. The responses from just over one hundred students give useful indications of what students think about good teaching.

Results

Open-ended surveys usually provide rich, descriptive responses which are not easy to analyse. They indicate the great diversity of views within a class and it is therefore often difficult to draw firm conclusions from the results. Nevertheless, patterns of responses do usually emerge.
Each open-ended question was analysed by developing categories that seemed to describe the answer provided by the student. This resulted in nearly 40 categories for the question on good teaching. Inspection of these categories resulted in the grouping of most of them under a few headings, which appear in the tables below.

The responses to the question on learning were analysed using the six conceptions of learning identified by Marton, Dall’ Alba and Beatie (1993).

Views on good teaching

The students’ rating of teaching using the five-point scale- ‘excellent’ to ‘poor’ was:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>100-Level</th>
<th>300-Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent/Very Good</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good/Satisfactory</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Means</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The scale used ranged from 1 = ‘Excellent’ to 5 = ‘Poor’.

Thus the 100-level students rated the teaching as slightly better than the 300-level students. The means indicate that the teaching is regarded as ‘good’ since three (3) on the scale is equivalent to ‘good’. Nevertheless all but one student indicated that the teaching could be improved.

Two questions on the survey gave information on the students’ views of good teaching, the direct question ‘describe what you mean by good teaching’ and the question ‘what do you hope to learn from lectures?’ The second question was designed to find out the kind of teaching students are looking for and to give insights into their conceptions of learning and knowledge from which it is possible to deduce their likely approach to learning. Lecturing is one form of teaching and good
teaching should encompass other forms of teaching. However, since lecturing forms such a large part of a student’s experience of learning at the U.S.P. then this question should provide useful insights into the student’s perception of teaching.

The students’ responses were mostly a number of short sentences describing different aspects of good teaching. There were, however, some who wrote a short paragraph and these have been categorised as ‘descriptions of good teaching.’

The picture of a good teacher that emerges is one who communicates the ‘message’ well, who makes things clear so that students can understand. This was the main descriptive category in both 100 and 300-level students, so that there is very little difference between the two groups. In addition, a good teacher has good relations with students and this was particularly noticeable with the 300-level students. Why this should be so is not very clear.

The details of the categories for both groups of students are set out below.

**Characteristics of Good Teaching**

**100-Level Students (No. of Responses = 98 from 39 students)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>No. (% of respondents)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>52 (53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear explanations</td>
<td>1 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear speech</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptions of Good Teaching (see table below)</td>
<td>11 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations with students</td>
<td>7 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Qualities of teacher</strong></td>
<td>6 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages student participation</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (10 separate categories)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** energetic, enthusiastic, patient with students, friendly, kind, confident
300-Level Students (No. of Responses = 215 from 64 students)

No. (% of respondents)

**Communication**

- Clear speech 15
- Clear explanation 15
- Use of visual aids 11
- Use of local examples 10
- Interesting presentation 10

- Relations with students 46 (21)

**Descriptions of good teaching**

(see below)

- Qualities of teachers 12 (6)

**Subject Knowledge**

9 (4)

Other (8 separate categories) 22

**TOTAL** 215

*Relations with students*

This includes being friendly and knowing students by name, prepared to answer questions, helping with academic and personal problems, thinking not just about the intelligent students, treating students with dignity, not abusing them in front of the class.

**Descriptions of good teaching by 300-level students**

There were two main categories within these descriptions which are illustrated by the following quotes by students:

(Note the numbers and letter in brackets after the quote (e.g. 22A) is the
student number, while A represents a 100-level student and B represents a 300-level student).

1. Transmitting or communicating knowledge
   - good teaching is the ability of the teacher to effectively communicate the subject to the students. (22A)
   - for me good teaching is where the teacher or lecturer is able to communicate messages to the students effectively. (7B)

2. Concern for students and enabling students to learn
   - good teaching is explaining things in a very simple manner which the students can easily understand (19A).
   - Basically good teaching is putting the interests of the students at first priority (4A)
   - good teaching is where learning takes place. The teacher is able to facilitate with the learner’s need. (47B)

There were also two different views which correspond to one of Ramsden’s characteristics, namely enthusiasm for the subject.

3. Enthusiasm for the subject and developing student interest in the subject.
   - good teaching is where the lecturer teaches us as if he’s teaching individually and not collectively. He/she doesn’t read notes for the whole lecture. He/she makes the lecture sound exciting for us because when we watch him/her teaching he sounds as if he is still fascinated or excited about the subject he’s teaching so much that he really wants us to experience the excitement of learning what he’s trying to teach us. (6A)
after an hour or two's class the teacher who teaches sees that
the students leave the class with an air of excitement the
attentions of the students has been captured (no matter how
long the session is....(60B)

Other qualities of good teaching

It is interesting to note that some other qualities of good teaching that
are listed in the references given at the beginning of this paper are not
mentioned by students. For example, apart from the two quotes given
above there is no mention of the inspirational qualities of a good teacher,
such as challenging ideas and beliefs, stimulating interest in a subject,
encouraging change as a person. Neither are fair assessment methods
and helpful feedback mentioned. Does this suggest that students are not
experiencing this aspect of teaching?

What students hope to learn from lectures?

The responses from this question were divided into three categories
which are illustrated with some quotations.

1. Learning generally where students were interested in a wider
   understanding of the topic and how it applies in the world.

   • I look forward to get a clearer understanding of the texts, course
     book, readers, readings. In other words, lecturers reinforced
     what I read. To open the gap of puzzlement of what will be next
     in the next units. It sort of links one unit with the next.(5A)

   • As much as possible learning should not be entirely exam
     centred. I hope to be aware of the latest developments as well
     as the basic theory I am pursuing. (84B)

2. Learning with a more specific focus.

   • The material being covered in a pretty much summary of perhaps
     the reading (additional) of the text book. If texts are not
emphasised much then I expect my lecture notes to be my bible. It should contain everything. (83B)

- Whatever is taught by the lecturers (relevant stuff). (64B)
- Everything that is in the notes, why? so we students don’t have to waste time reading/studying the notes again. (2A)
- the things that I need to know from the courses I take in the University. (7A)

3. Strategic focus, where students hoped to learn from lectures what would help them with future employment, to pass examinations and to get good grades.

- Everything relevant to the topic syllabus to the students when sitting for examination. Irrelevant issues to be left out. (8A)
- The points that will help me pass with good grades. (30A)
- What a student has to do to succeed in his career. (64B)

This strategic focus was strongly emphasised in this honest response to this question:

- To be quite honest the main aim of each student is to pass an exam. Each semester is carried out by assessing the lecturer—does he just test from his lecture notes or does he test other topics as well, which can be quite frustrating as I think each student is more geared up to passing the exams rather than to get a good grasp and understanding of the subject for future use. I suppose that's why I can't remember things learned in 100 levels - because it gets to the stage where passing exams is all that matters. Therefore I hope that lectures as well as tutorials prepares students to attempt questions given in the exam. (66B)

A few students hoped to learn how to teach from the lectures.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>100-Level</th>
<th>300-Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning generally</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning specifically</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic focus</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>41</strong></td>
<td><strong>64</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The focus of all categories is very much on the content to be learned so that a lecture is seen as a place to receive information. This is in line with the conception of good teaching, derived from the responses given to the direct question, which emphasises good communication of information between a teacher and a student.

The relationship between perceptions of good teaching and conceptions of learning

It was possible to categorise most of the responses to the question ‘what do you mean by learning’ using the categories of Marton, Dall’Alba and Beaty (1993) who describe learning as:

1. Increasing one’s knowledge.
2. Memorising and reproducing.
3. Applying knowledge.
4. Understanding.
5. Seeing something in a different way.
6. Changing as a person.

Dividing the six conceptions into reproductive and transformational conceptions of learning we find the following results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptions of Learning</th>
<th>100-Level</th>
<th>300-Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reproductive (Conceptions 1-3)</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformational (Conceptions 4-6)</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other descriptions of learning</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are no dramatic differences between the conceptions held by the two groups of students. There is an increase in the percentage of transformational conceptions as one might expect. However, it is of concern that the number of students at the 300-level holding reproductive conceptions is actually higher than those at the 100-level. One would have hoped that as a result of their experiences of learning, the number would be considerably less. Earlier it was noted that there were few differences between the perceptions of good teaching by the two groups.

The relationship between conceptions of learning and the students' conceptions of teaching in this study is not as clear cut as it appears to be in the research of Van Rossum et al (1985). The most general statement that can made is that the majority of the U.S.P. students' conceptions of good teaching fitted broadly into the 'closed' description of teaching used by Van Rossum and Taylor (1987), but those students who held transformational conceptions of learning did not appear to hold 'open' conceptions of teaching. However, the evidence from this study is really not strong enough to confirm the connection between conceptions of learning and teaching.

Discussion

The major characteristic of good teaching as perceived by the students was good communication of knowledge so that students could understand the 'message.' There seemed to be very little difference between the conceptions of good teaching between 100- and 300-level students. Boulton-Lewis (1994), using a different methodology showed that there was little change in knowledge about learning by students across the years of tertiary study. This would imply that conceptions of good teaching are unlikely to change either.

Teaching of this nature will result in reproductive learning, but it is unlikely to develop higher conceptions of learning. Neither is it likely to develop higher cognitive skills such as critical thinking and problem solving. The students are likely to leave the U.S.P. with much knowledge but lacking deep understanding of concepts.
However, there is evidence, (Ramsden, 1992:170), that when students experience more 'open' teaching e.g. project work and other forms of independent learning, their conceptions of learning then develop in ways that transform their thinking. If that is the case, then the nature of teaching to which students are exposed needs to be changed. Teaching as transmission of knowledge is a common conception at the U.S.P. and that kind of teaching, as we have seen, leads to reproductive learning. Therefore, one intervention strategy to improve student learning would be to encourage staff to examine their own teaching conceptions and the consequences that result from them. Those who have undertaken this self examination through a graduate certificate course in tertiary teaching at the University of Queensland show remarkable changes in approaches to teaching which are likely to have very positive effects on student learning [Butler (1996)].

References


