

Methods to Enhance Student Learning: A Student Appraisal of Teaching Practise

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Abstract

“We cannot teach another person directly but only facilitate their learning” (Khambadkone, 2003).

The Irish government is committed to improving teaching and learning in higher educational institutions as evidenced by the investment of €510m over the six years of the NDP’s lifetime. “The role of the higher education system is critical to Ireland’s future success” (HEA, 2008). James argues that whilst certain aspects of higher education cannot be validly judged by students (such as the overall coherence of the curriculum), they are well equipped to judge “the more tangible, short term components of the experience and to judge aspects of the process of higher education” (James, 2001). These areas include the availability of IT support, feedback and the teaching skills of the academic staff etc. Students “have things to tell us that only they can say with authority. They are ready to advise us if asked” (Jackson, 2006).

To capture students’ real experiences in the classroom and to identify methods to enhance their learning, an online survey of students’ experiences and expectations of academic practise at GMIT was carried out. From an undergraduate student body of 4,889 students, across five geographically dispersed campuses, a total of 694 completed and usable questionnaires were received, yielding an overall response rate of 14.1%.

Keywords : Good teaching, Bad teaching, Students’ expectations, Students’ experiences

Introduction

The Irish government is committed to improving teaching and learning in higher educational institutions as evidenced by the investment of €510m over the six years of the NDP¹'s lifetime. "The role of the higher educational system is critical² to Ireland's future success" (HEA, 2008). Indeed, the vision of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) for higher education in Ireland between 2008 to 2010 is to ensure that the student is the central focus of all higher education activities (HEA, 2008-2010] However, the transition between secondary and tertiary institutions has been internationally recognized as a growing challenge for both students and third level educators alike (Gilmartin, 2008). This challenge revolves around the expectation of the 'ipod generation' regarding third level education – an expectation which requires different modes of instruction to ensure effective teaching for a student body which is diverse in culture, age (widening participation) and learning approaches (Mohanna, 2007). In the final analysis regarding effective teaching, the ultimate arbiters will be the students. James argues that whilst certain aspects of higher education cannot be validly judged by them, they are well equipped to judge "the more tangible, short term components of the experience and to judge aspects of the process of higher education" (James, 2001). Students "have things to tell us that only they can say with authority" (Jackson, 2006). In this era of rising student numbers³, intense competition, ever-increasing tasks and reduced funding, we cannot afford to ignore the voice of the students, who, as Biggs points out, are increasingly demanding value for money (Biggs, 2006).

Survey Process

¹ National Development Plan

² The Union of students in Ireland also agree that "the more highly Ireland is educated, the better we will be able to weather the financial storms [USI, 2008]".

³ Enrolments in IoTs at Level 8 have increased by almost 20% since 2005 [HEA, 2006/2007] whilst postgraduate enrolments are increasing rapidly (18% from 05/06 and 06/07 levels). Furthermore, the number of mature (+23) new entrants increased by 14% between 05/06 and 06/07[HEA, 2006/2007].

Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) is a geographically dispersed college, with outreach campuses in Galway, Castlebar, Letterfrack and Mountbellew. As part of the marketing strategy, students who had fully completed the online survey were put into a draw to win one of three ipods. With the co-operation of the IT staff, an animation - with an embedded link to the online survey launch page - was one of the first things that all students saw on logging into their Moodle⁴ accounts. This was active for the duration of the survey. To cater to those who did not use their Moodle accounts, emails were sent to the dispersed student body, with a link to the survey start page. The online survey was active for 3 weeks. Follow-up email reminders were deployed at the mid-way point in the survey. Whilst students were asked to provide contact details (i.e. mobile phone number), anonymity was respected, for as Kelly contends, “anonymous feedback results in responses that are more candid (Kelly, 2005).

Effective Teaching

In today’s market vernacular, students are our customers. Therefore as suppliers, we need to ensure that we meet their educational demands by providing effective teaching and a successful learning environment. Yet, before examining students’ views on what constitutes good and bad teaching, we should first look to literature for a listing of the traits of effective teachers/lecturers.

Eble cites the characteristics of effective teachers to include mastery of the subject, competence, well prepared lectures, the use of real life examples, encouragement of students' questions, approachability, the provision of an immediate response to student questions and the provision of corrective feedback (Eble, 1971). Biggs argues that effective teaching results in the engagement⁵ of students in learning related activities (Biggs, 2006). Glenn includes active teaching, the pacing of instruction, structured content and enthusiasm as the main components of good teaching (Glenn, 2001). Effective teaching requires lecturers to be clear about the intended learning (Butcher,

⁴ Moodle is the virtual learning environment in use at GMIT

⁵ Gibson states that “one of the key challenges facing higher education today is student engagement” (Gibson, 2006)

2006). Meanwhile, Seldin recognises the traits of effective teachers to include respect for students, the use of varied instructional formats, the engagement of the students, the provision of feedback, real life examples and clear guidelines concerning expectations for assignments, the ability to relate easily to students and the continual reflection on their own teaching performance (Seldin, 1989). Ramsden includes enthusiasm, passion for the subject, the establishment of clear guidelines, respect for students, formative feedback and the ability to listen to students, as some of the characteristics of good teaching (Ramsden, 1995). The HEA in the UK contends that an important aspect of effective teaching is effective feedback (Juwah, 2004).

Clearly, the common themes from literature regarding effective teaching characteristics include; concern for students, clearly defined guidelines for assignments, effective feedback, ability to relate to students and encouragement of student engagement to foster deep learning.

Students' views on good and bad teaching

From an undergraduate student body of 4,889 students, across five geographically dispersed campuses, a total of 694 completed and usable questionnaires were received, yielding an overall response rate of 14.1%.

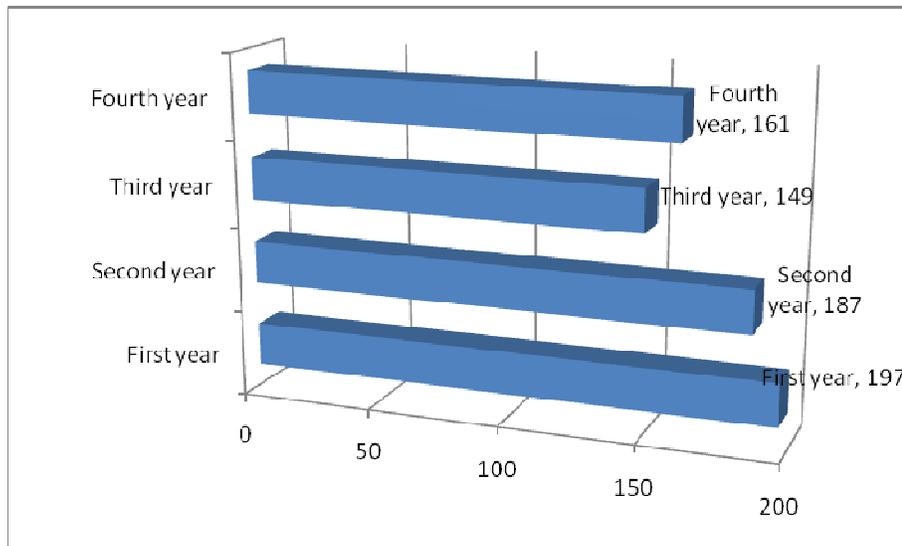


Figure 1 : Year of study

Even though there was a fairly even distribution of first, second, third and fourth year students participating in the online survey, the majority of respondents were first year students (28 per cent, 197) (figure 1).

In order to clearly present the students' views on what constituted bad teaching, the survey findings are classified under the following headings;

- Communication – ability to project voice, clarity of speech, speed of talking etc. (table 1)
- Feedback and grading – clarity of assignment/project guidelines, speed and comprehensiveness of critical feedback (table 2)
- Knowledge – subject matter mastery, ability to answer questions (table 3)
- Class participation and interaction – degree to which lecturers encourage and seek student participation and involvement in the class (table 4)
- Presentation – presentation and explanation of the subject matter with regard to clarity, pace of delivery, use of relevant and relatable examples (table 5)
- Students' perspectives on lecturers' personalities – how students perceive lecturers' attitudes (table 6)
- Concern for students – lecturer approachability and helpfulness (table 7)
- Discipline – punctuality, class control (table 8)

All respondents provided at least one if not multiple comments on the question of what constituted bad teaching, so that over 850 answers were provided.

COMMUNICATION	n = 82
Doesn't listen	8
Mumbles when talking	3
Long winded	6
Waffles	8
Repeats the same thing in every lecture,	4
Monotone voice	12
Talks too fast	6
Overly academic tone	1

Difficult to understand	6
Incoherent	1
Use same catch phrases repeatedly	2
Can't communicate	11
Unclear	3
Hard to hear	3
Talks a lot about himself	2
His voice is boring and hard to understand, as it raises and lowers in pitch while talking through a sentence	6

Table 1 : Communication

FEEDBACK & GRADING	n = 49
Doesn't provide an exact assessment figure	1
Takes forever to return marks/give feedback	9
Never marks fairly	2
Never gives feedback	1
Doesn't grade project until the end of year	1
Hard marker	5
Lack of time for assignments	1
Doesn't explain where you went wrong	1
Doesn't give solutions to questions	1
No guidelines for assignments/projects	27

Table 2: Feedback and grading

KNOWLEDGE	n = 48
Does not find out the answer	1
Can't and won't answer questions	7
Doesn't know the content	20
Doesn't know how to prepare students for exams	2
Can't use computers properly	1
Doesn't give the right time for tests	1
He confuses himself, which confuses students	3
Never finishes a question in the lecture	1
Answers questions vaguely	1
Doesn't use relevant examples	5
Sometimes he cannot show us how to do assignments because he does not know	1
Doesn't let you know what to do to achieve marks	4
Tells people different ways to do things – confusing	1

Table 3 : Knowledge

CLASS PARTICIPATION AND INTERACTION	n = 62
No interaction	15
Doesn't check if students are okay with the topic before moving on!	10
Doesn't give time for questions. Afterwards, you are confused	13
Doesn't listen to the students' questions	8
No room for discussion	1
Lack of commitment regarding student involvement	8
Asks too many questions and waits for the exact answer even if someone has come very close to the right one.	1
Tries for participation when it's not needed	1
Doesn't listen to our views	2
Makes you feel uncomfortable about asking a question	2
When you make suggestions ask questions. they flatly say NO and make you feel like not making further comments	1

Table 4 : Class participation and interaction

PRESENTATION	n = 433
No sample exam questions are ever given	2
Not enough examples or time on practical worked examples	14
No course outline/structure	5
Bad notes (i.e. messy, complicated, hard to understand etc.)	24
Not enough notes	9
Too many notes	4
Just reads off his notes or the slides	16
Goes off the topic	7
Doesn't relate the material to anything	2
Doesn't prepare for class	17
Goes into too much detail	2
Never gives a break in a two hour lecture	3
Is unclear about what they want from us	3
Does not get the point across	3
PowerPoint is used but all the text is very small	1
Unstructured / dis-organised classes	8
Can't concentrate on class because I'm always too busy taking down pages of notes	16
Goes through material too fast	65
Sloppy and unclear presentation	14
Uses PowerPoint too much	1

Can spend too long on one subject	1
Doesn't know how to teach	4
Very old fashioned	2
She gives exams on things that you never heard of before and she doesn't explain anything.	1
Lazy in presentation	6
Relies too much on simple brief overheads	1
Bad writing	1
Always has spelling and grammar mistakes in class presentations	1
Disinterested in topic	16
Goes too slow	1
The fact the he shows us a worked example and only finishes half of it	1
Irrelevant material	4
Continuously giving extra work and classes	1
Not enough assignments	1
Difficult to follow	5
Complicates everything	1
He always starts new stuff even if we are not finished with the exercise he gave us	1
Not enough detail in topic	2
Doesn't explain what he wants	15
Doesn't explain well	59
Explains simple things slowly and complicated things quickly	3
Scares the class so no questions can be asked	31
Carries on even when the class is lost	20
Always unclear as to what's expected of you	5
Does not give a straight answer	1
Shouts at students when he's not explaining himself properly	1
Moves onto new topics too quickly	6
Scares the class so no questions can be asked	3
Assumes the student knows what they are talking about	14
Doesn't realise when we are having problems with the topic	2
No slides – just talks	2
Makes mistakes	1
Thinks that all classmates are at the same level when clearly, they may not be	4

Table 5 : Presentation

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON LECTURERS' PERSONALITIES	n = 61
She seems snobby and gives an impression of being very grand	1
Unable to lower himself and his ambitions to our level of knowledge	1
Not nice	1
Unapproachable	14

Not encouraging	1
Very lazy overall	1
Biased	3
Gets really angry for no reason	2
He thinks he's funny and he's not	1
Lack of enthusiasm	3
Too strict and uptight for a lecturer	1
Un motivated	1
Not likeable	2
Thinks she is better than everyone else	1
Impatient	2
Unpleasant	2
Answers questions with an air of smugness	2
No sense of humour	1
Can be quite detached from the class	1
Unfair	1
Poor sense of judgment	1
Inconsistent attitude	1
Very moody	5
Going nowhere attitude	1
Makes snide comments	1
Zero tolerance	1
Indifferent to class mood	2
Bad attitude	1
Sarcastic	1
Mean	1
Intimidating	1
Doesn't like teaching	2
Arrogant	1

Table 6 : Students' perspectives on lecturers' personalities

CONCERN FOR STUDENTS	n = 88
Spends time helping mature students and no time for anybody else	2
Doesn't care about students, their grades and/or their work	8
Seems to hate students	2
Too busy to help students in difficulty	16
Can't relate to students	3
Criticizes students	2
Laughs at us in class when we make a mistake	1

Not understanding	3
Looks down on students	3
Makes you feel stupid	4
Not really interested in what students have to say about anything	2
Doesn't encourage	1
He/she singles you out, makes you feel uncomfortable and it's almost like bullying	2
Talks at the students rather than talks to them	2
Treats students like primary/secondary school students	3
Has favourites. Doesn't realize potential in those who are not the favourites	3
Disrespects students	2
Treats the students like scum	1
Not focused on students' progress	1
Expects too much from the students	15
Never available	12

Table 7 : Concern for students

DISCIPLINE	n = 43
Always late	18
Lack of control of class	6
You could start clapping your hands and he wouldn't notice	1
Doesn't keep the attention of the class	5
Doesn't turn up for class	9
Disorganized	1
Doesn't fully engage the class	1
Allows constant messing and chatting in the class	1
Takes too much time getting organized in the class before starting the class	1

Table 8 : Discipline

In answer to the question about what constituted good teaching, students' main views are displayed in figure 2 (using a similar classification scheme to that used in tables 1 to 8 respectively).

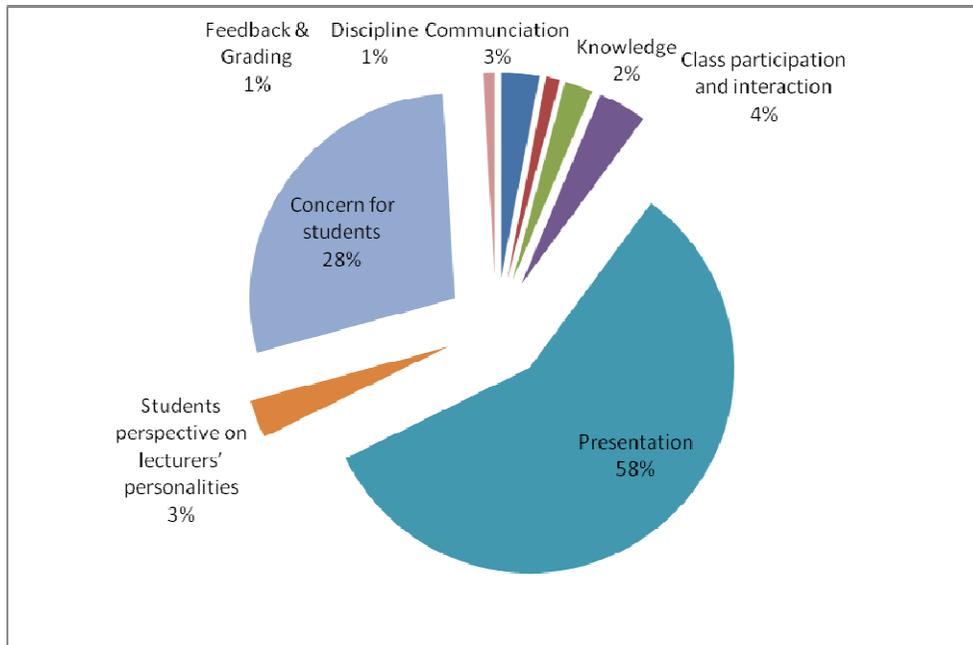


Figure 2 : Good teaching

Conclusions and discussion points

With a response rate of 14.1% (694 respondents), the online student survey in GMIT has provided a set of interesting discussion points from which to proceed. If we aim to ensure a better and more successful learning experience for our students, then we have to listen to and act on their views. 694 students gave more than 866 descriptions of what they believed comprised bad teaching compared with over 1000 descriptions of good teaching traits. From an analysis of the results, students seemed to put more effort into describing behavior that cared about them, listened to their views, explained content, ensured that they understood before proceeding, was concerned about their progress, wanted them to do well and encouraged them to participate in class discussions. Students showed that they appreciated lecturers who are available, passionate about their subject, punctual, enthusiastic and knowledgeable. They welcomed lecturers who put time and effort into the lecture, make subject matter more interesting and fun, provide a clear course structure and set of guidelines as to what's expected of them in assignments, return assignments on time, provide good feedback and who are available and happy to help them.

When students commented on bad teaching, they focused primarily on the fast pace of delivery, not ensuring that students understood before proceeding, unclear notes and bad explanations. Students also complained about lecturers who mumbled, waffled and were hard to hear. Those they considered bad teachers, they viewed as unconcerned with students' needs, incapable of relating to students, unavailable, unpunctual, unhelpful and biased. Regarding the students' perspectives on the personalities of bad teachers, the vehemence with which they described arrogant, unapproachable, moody, condescending and unlikable lecturers was palpable.

Given the centrality of higher education to Ireland's future success and the role of the student as the central focus of all higher education activities, it is incumbent on higher education institutions to provide quality teaching and learning, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This survey of 694 students across all years and disciplines, has outlined prescriptive changes needed to improve teaching on a continuous basis. Regarding how effective we are in the eventual implementation of such changes, we will have to wait and ask the students, for in the final analysis, they are the ultimate authority of effective teaching and learning success.

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