

DIFFERENCES IN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY AND CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Understanding different student groups is critical to delivering consistent service quality in the classroom. This paper examines student perceptions of service quality and classroom experience across categories such as major, class year and preferred learning style, and how these differences influence the delivery of service quality in a teaching environment.

INTRODUCTION

It is no longer an acceptable premise in academia that a good learning environment requires simply a teacher who possesses those traits perceived by higher education to be attributes of teaching excellence, such as communication skills, knowledge, credibility, and preparedness. Much current thinking now holds that a good learning environment requires the combination of teaching quality factors coupled with the creation of an environment where the students are treated as customers and education as a service product. In this paper, we examine how students' perceptions of service quality and classroom environment vary among different student groups and preferences, to help establish better criteria for a good classroom and service experience among these student groups.

Marketing scholars have been studying the definition of teaching excellence for nearly 20 years. Conant, Smart and Kelly first studied marketing master teachers in 1988 and later, in 2003, updated their initial study. What they concluded was that although 15 years had passed since their initial study, the definition of a good marketing teacher had not changed substantially; strong communication skills, use of an interactive style and asking thought-provoking questions still were essential attributes of teaching excellence. A more recent study (Faranda and Clarke, 2004) conducted in-depth interviews with students to determine the attributes of an outstanding professor. Their studies revealed five primary issues deemed by senior level undergraduate students to be critical for an outstanding instructor: rapport, delivery, fairness, knowledge and credibility.

Although Kelly, Conant, and Smart (1991) proposed four service quality factors (responsiveness, reliability, empathy and tangibles), and others (Brown & Koenig, 1993; Divocky & Rothermel, 1989; Helms & Key, 1994; Hittman, 1993; Shim & Morgan, 1990) recognized that for improvement of the instructional process to be effective the student, as the recipient of the instruction, be viewed as the customer of the service, it is only recently that it has become commonplace to view the student as a "customer" (Brown, Kaldenberg, Browne and Brown 1998; McCollough and Gremler 1999). McCollough and Gremler (1999) assert that "important educational gains are to be achieved by treating students as customers, education as a service product and applying the lessons of service marketing to the classroom." This concept has led to some academic administrators holding the measurement of student satisfaction in as high regard as other business areas.

Desai, Damewood and Jones (2001) advanced the notion of a "consumer-oriented" approach to teaching in surveying of students and teachers regarding their perceptions of what constituted a good teacher. This study concluded that the following were characteristic of effective instruction: encouragement of student input, facilitating student-teacher communication and making course materials readily available. They proposed a marketing-type

model of customer/student orientation as a means for improving teaching and improving student response to classes and instructors, and concluded that if students are viewed as customers and teachers see themselves as professional educators, teachers can improve and it would follow that students would view those teachers as improved.

The objective of this study was to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this “student/customer service” aspect of an effective learning environment, and how it varies with student demographics. By understanding the cultural expectations and customer needs of specific student groups, and how these expectations and needs change over the life cycle of a college education, teachers can better target their efforts to create an optimal learning environment for all students.

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was administered to 434 students at a liberal arts college on the East Coast during the first two weeks of the academic term, which was designed to assess both key student demographics and attitudes towards the classroom experience. Questions on this survey included the following:

- 1.) What year are you? Please circle. Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Other
- 2.) What is your Major/Specialization?
- 3.) Please provide your definition of a “great” or “awesome” course.
- 4.) Please give your definition of an instructor providing excellent “customer/student” service in the classroom.
- 5.) Please mark an “x” in the appropriate box (Poor, Average, Good, or Excellent) to indicate how you feel towards your ability to learn from each of these teaching methods:
 - i.) Instructor using PowerPoint/Internet with Lecture
 - ii.) Lecture (no notes) with Q& A from Students
 - iii.) Debates
 - iv.) Case Videos with Discussion
 - v.) Group Discussion
 - vi.) Group Activities
 - vii.) Guest Speakers

This survey also included other questions, which were not used in this specific study; they included questions relating to career goals, hobbies and interests, and use of spare time. Results from the survey questions listed above were then coded as followed:

- Class year was coded on a 1 to 4 scale from freshman through senior year.
- Major and specialization values were grouped into one of the following overall categories: Business, Education, Science/Math, Liberal Arts, Social Science, Nursing, and a miscellaneous category for students whose majors were undecided at the time of the survey.
- Descriptions of a “great” course (course factors) were qualitatively grouped into one of the following categories, as coded on subsequent figures:
 - Content: Factors involving the course material and its application to the student’s life and career.
 - Workload: Factors involving grading, amount of time required, quantity of homework, respect for overall student workloads, and similar factors.
 - “Fun”: Factors involving an interesting, entertaining and enjoyable educational experience.
 - Communications: Factors involving the instructor’s communications and pedagogical skills.
 - Teaching Techniques (TT): Factors involving the use of unique or multiple teaching approaches in the classroom.
 - Student Interaction (SI): Factors involving the interaction between instructors and students, both during classes and when assisting students outside the classroom.
 - Instructor Competence (IC): Factors involving instructor competencies such as being knowledgeable about their subject matter, organized, prepared and able to set clear student expectations.
- Descriptions of excellent “customer/student” service in the classroom (service factors) were also qualitatively grouped into one of the above categories, with responses limited to the categories of Communications, Fun, Teaching Techniques, Student Interaction and Instructor Competence, as well as a default category of “none” for students who chose not to respond to the question.

- A Likert scale from 1 to 4, corresponding to rankings from Poor to Excellent, was used to classify student responses to the teaching methods listed above.

These course factors and service factors were then correlated against student responses for class year and major, as well as against high ratings (e.g. 4 out of 4) for each of the teaching approaches listed, to examine how these course and service factors vary for specific student groups and preferences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The definition of a good course and the perception of service quality each have very specific - and different - definitions in the minds of students. Overall course ratings rank both content and "fun" as the most important factors, with student interaction, teaching techniques and communications skills forming the next most important cluster of factors. By comparison, student interaction is overwhelmingly rated as the most important factor in service quality.

Rankings of course and service factors vary significantly, however, when correlated against other factors in the survey. A summary of these results is as follows:

1. Course and service factors versus class year

The key finding among these results was that course rankings vary significantly by class year. Overall, the value of content increases as students get closer to graduation, while the value of "fun" appears to decline over time, possibly reflecting an increased concern for the ability to learn and apply material as one's college education progresses. Conversely, service ratings appear to have few significant rating differences by class year.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

2. Course and service factors versus academic major

Both course and service ratings appear to vary significantly by major: Among course factors, content ranks highest among business, liberal arts and nursing students, while "fun" ranks highest among education major and undeclared students. These factors are largely equivalent among science and social science students.

Among service factors, student interaction is far and away most important for all majors, but the percentages vary significantly, from a low of near 50% for business majors to a high of approximately 75% for liberal arts, social science and nursing students. Concomitantly, "fun" ranks much higher as a service factor among business students.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

3. Course and service factors versus learning styles

There are significant differences in factor ratings across students who gave high scores to different types of learning styles. In general, students who rate passive modalities such as learning media and guest speakers highly also tend to rate "fun" ahead of content and other factors, although not exclusively. Conversely, more active modalities such as debates and group discussions are associated with higher relative ratings for content versus other factors. One of the more passive modalities, videos, is also associated with higher scores for workload issues, while teaching techniques rank more highly with specific modalities such as learning media, group discussions and group activities.

As with other correlations, service factors tend consistently towards a desire for better student interaction. One significant trend, however, is that relative ratings for "fun" tend to be higher for passive modalities such as learning media, videos and guest speakers, and lower for more active ones such as group discussions and group activities.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

SUMMARY

The results presented here represent a starting point for examining student differences and learning preferences as a basis for creating both high service quality and teaching excellence in a classroom environment. The potential sampling error of a single study means that specific results may vary, and furthermore be subject to cross-correlation effects; for example, a group of senior business students are likely to have different rating values than freshman business students. At the same time, these results confirm that student differences significantly impact perceptions of service quality in the classroom, and that these differences represent a promising area for further study.

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FIGURES

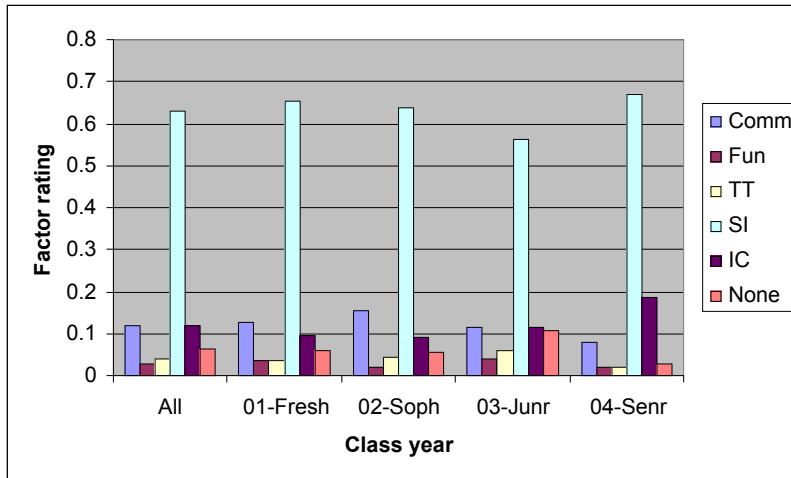
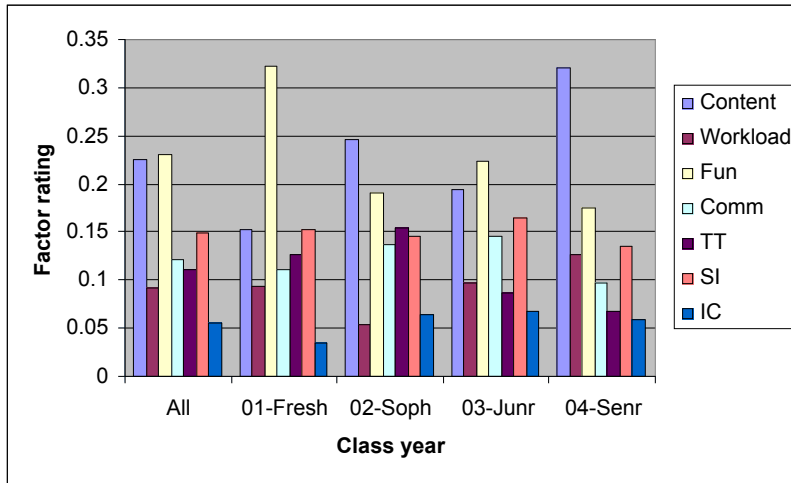


Figure 1. Course and service factors versus class year.

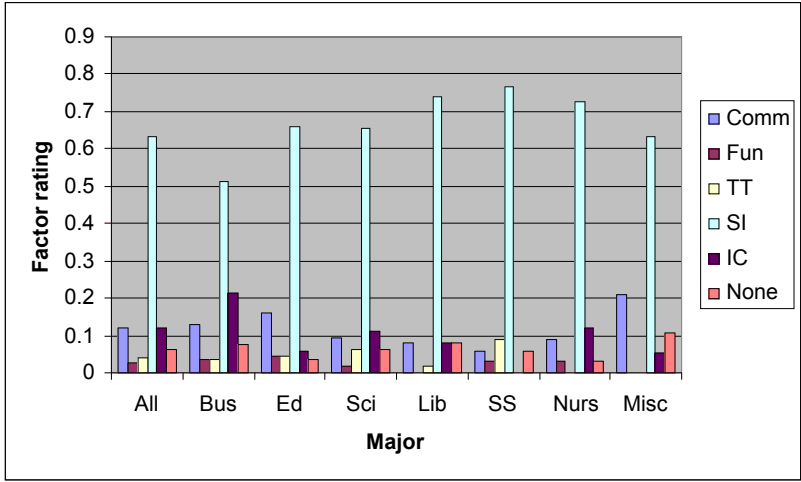
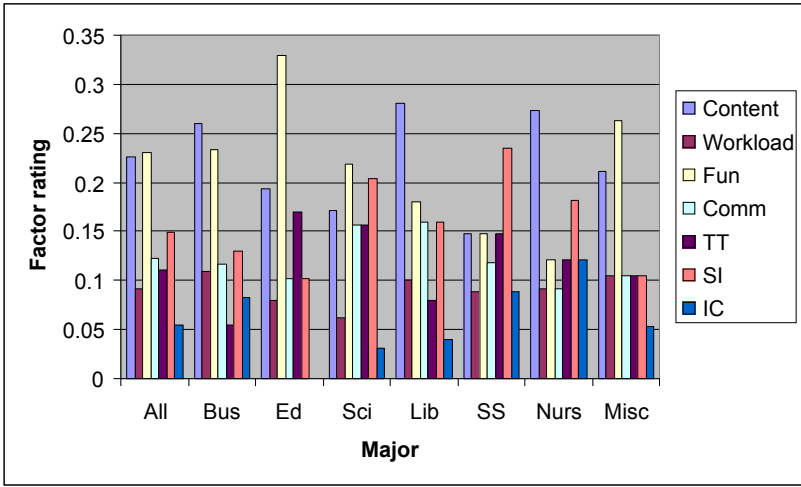


Figure 2. Course and service factors versus academic major.

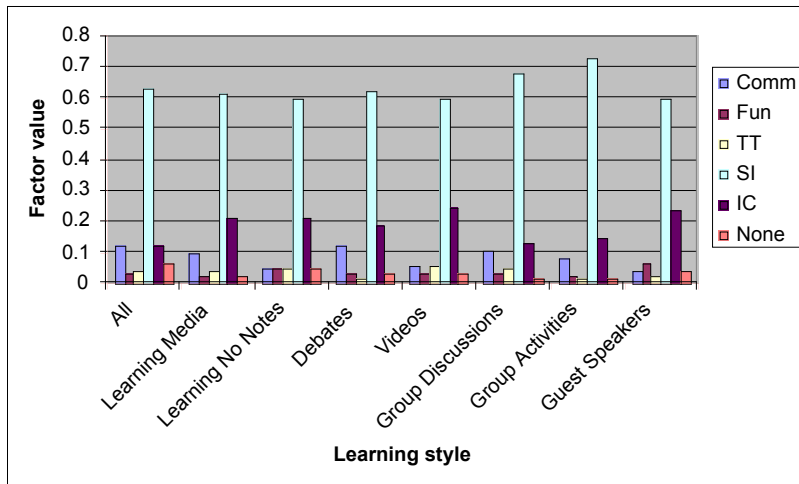
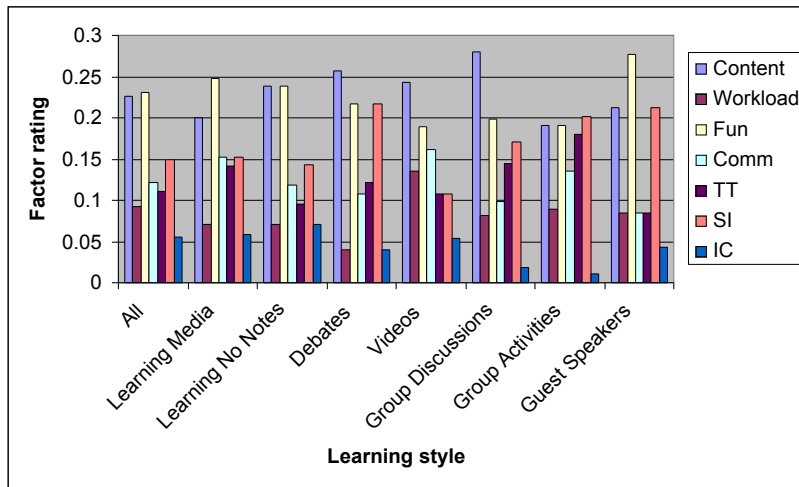


Figure 3. Course and service factors versus learning style.