Students' Evaluation of Teaching Quality[*]

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Students' evaluations of teaching quality are one of the crucial components of the teaching quality evaluation (along with external evaluation, opinions of colleagues, etc.). According to our research and professional experience, the teaching quality has to be examined in correlation with personality traits of a lecturer. Students' surveys (aiming at evaluating the teaching quality) have to consider the most valuable factors of the teaching quality and qualities of lecturers, which comprise knowledge transfer, knowledge evaluation, accessibility of a lecturer and his/her personality traits. In order to obtain quality results and compare them among various universities, a unified questionnaire should be applied when exploring the students' evaluations of teaching quality.

Keywords: student evaluation of teaching, teaching quality evaluation methods, student survey

Research and Analysis of Results

Throughout the development process, universities of post-Soviet states, including Latvia, faced the necessity to improve its quality of education—due to the increasing competition with other (European) universities as well as the external (including state) requirements and control.

A lecturer's input is the corner stone of quality assurance in higher education. One of the key elements of evaluating the quality of teaching and lecturers is students' evaluations of teaching quality.

At the same time, many authors, e.g., Berk (2008-2009), Cashin (1989) and Way (1993), fairly considered that results of student surveys are more applicable as a feedback tool. For instance, Berk (2008-2009), while admitting that the pivotal role rests with the students' evaluations, pointed out that it may be biased or even prejudiced due to its subjective nature. Thus, it is the essential, but not sufficient source of information. Way (1993, p. 220) stated that the evaluation of teaching quality and a teacher by students may be taken into consideration only when examining the teaching quality and providing feedback. Such authors as Cashin (1989, p. 3) contemplated that the evaluation of teaching quality and teachers by students should take into account that students may be able to provide an objective evaluation of only four of the following components: knowledge transfer, knowledge evaluation, availability of a lecturer, administrative requirements, i.e., teachers' presence during lectures, sufficient supply of library with relevant literature, etc..

Surveying is a widely used method to evaluate the teaching quality (a case of external control, when the evaluation is undertaken by experts during discussions with students, is an exception). In this respect, a number of essential questions arise on contents of a questionnaire, surveying techniques and analysis of results. Scriven

(1995, p. 3) stated that that data provided by students are reliable, if survey questions contain "veritable criteria" instead of "dubious indicators". Too wide questions lead to erroneous conclusions. One of the most common errors is the use of questions, which concern comparisons of teachers and their methods or "finding out whether their course is the best among those taken by the students". The American professor Berk (2008-2009) distinguished 14 potential sources for teaching quality evaluation (i.e., evaluation by students, colleagues, external experts, self-evaluation, video, student interviews, evaluation by graduates, employers, managers, as well as grants, academic awards, transcripts and a teacher's portfolio).

The analysis of more than 40 various questionnaires employed for surveying in Latvia and Russia has indicated the lack of clear surveying principles (which do differ considerably in terms of volume and contents). Even within one country (for example, Latvia), the student surveys are not directly compatible since the results derive from questionnaires differing by contents and scope. For instance, the number of questions ranges from 13 to 40. The similar situation is observed in Russia. Having examined the surveys conducted in several Russian and Latvian universities, the authors found out that, in spite of the variety of questionnaires in terms of volumes and contents, the questions are not systematic. Some universities developed their own questionnaires and others used commonly known and approbated methods. One of the well-known examples is the "education quality evaluation map" by students. The map elaborated by Saint-Petersburg State University, Herzen University and Pomor State University contains 13 questions (quality indices) (Bordovskaya & Titova, 2003). The aforementioned method is used by Pomor State University (Vorozhcova et al., p. 8). The Institute of the Commonwealth of Independent States (2007) has worked out its own methodology and criteria of education quality evaluation. The method involves conducting surveys among the following target groups: managers, lecturers and students.

Along with defining the evaluation principles, it is necessary to define the notion of teaching. A renowned expert in higher education, Fink (2002, p. 47) stated that teaching is "the assistance to someone in studying something", while a "successful (good) teaching" is "the effective support of someone, who studies something significant". These two elements are the vital components of co-operation process between teachers and students. In addition, it is required to consider personality traits of a lecturer. Arreola, Theall, and Aleamoni, (2003, p. 4) stated that teaching involves four types of expression: (1) mastery, which means achieving of the highest level in a given subject area; (2) discovery, which includes all forms of research; (3) expansion which are announcement of research results concerning new products, services or actions valuable for the society at large; and (4) realization-implementation of research results, e.g., new products, services or actions valuable for the society at large. Cashin (2003, p. 531), following the viewpoint of Arreola et al. (2003), pointed out that teaching involves seven components: mastery of a subject, course materials, detailed elaboration of a course, knowledge transfer, knowledge evaluation, accessibility of a lecturer and administrative requirements.

The psychologist and lecturer of Oxford University, Herbert T. Marsh, invented a special SEEQ (students' evaluation of education quality) tool, which allows measuring the effectiveness of teaching at universities as per the following criteria: learning, enthusiasm, clarity, co-operation with a group, individual approach, presentation scope and interpretation, evaluation, homework and course complexity (Marsh & Roche, 1997, p. 1188). Ramsden (1994), the head of the UK Higher Education Academy, pointed out that the main aim of analyzing the teaching quality at universities is to encourage lecturers to look at the teaching process from the viewpoint of students, being aware of their thoughts and actions. Ramsden administered a questionnaire, containing 24 questions within the following six groups: qualitative teaching, clear goals and standards,

appropriate evaluation, appropriate scheduling, essential skills and overall contentment. In 2002, the Australian Government financed Ramsden's research. Then, five additional groups were added to the questionnaire: personal traits of graduates, intellectual motivation, student community, teaching resources and student support (Harris & James, 2006, p. 5). Nowadays, Flinders University, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, The University of New South Wales and other educational institutions use the aforementioned questionnaire to evaluate the quality of teaching.

Oxford University has also elaborated its own questionnaire as a part of the internal evaluation system of the teaching personnel, having added six additional questions to Ramsden's original 24 questions.

In order to enhance the quality of teaching, Stanford University (1997) recommended its lecturers to study four skill-demanding topics. The first two can be subject to change, while the latter are resistant to changes. These topics are: (1) clear presentation and compliance with teaching goals; (2) oral skills, or teaching tempo; (3) development of students' conceptual understandings and/or critical thinking; and (4) homework planning to enhance the learning process.

Vattano (1987), professor of Colorado State University, compiled the teaching manual which consists of materials designed to improve the quality of teaching in line with ten criteria of teaching quality.

In our literature review, we attempted to sum up the teaching quality evaluation criteria used by the abovementioned authors. Agreeing opinions are marked by sign "+" (see Table 1).

Table 1

The Teaching Quality Evaluation Criteria (As Suggested by the Authors)[1]

Criteria/author	Vattano Frank	Willian Cashin	David Way	Herbert Marsh	Paul Ramsden	Bordovska N., Titova E.
Group No. 1: Knowledge transfer						
Subject knowledge, professionalism	+	+	+			+
Organization and preparation, elaboration of teaching materials	+	+	+	+		+
Knowledge transfer		+	+			
Clarity and teaching quality				+	+	
Co-operation with students, group work				+		
Home work				+		
Course complexity, workload				+	+	+
Practical skills					+	
Group No. 2: Knowledge evaluation						
Knowledge evaluation		+	+	+	+	+
Administrative requirements		+				
High standards and transparency	+				+	+
Group No. 3: Personal traits						
Enthusiasm	+			+		
Perception of students' needs	+		+			
Openness	+					
Sense of humor	+					
Moral values	+					
Modesty	+					
Objectivity	+					
Relationship focus			+	+		+

In Table 1, we also divided the teaching quality evaluation criteria into three groups. According to W.

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[1] Table 1 lists the teaching quality evaluation criteria, which can be included into the unified student survey.

Cashin, "accessibility of a lecturer" can be the fourth group.

The consolidated table indicates the high level of disagreement on prioritizing the teaching quality evaluation criteria among authors. Thus, five out of six authors did not take into account the aspects of group work, as well as the attitudes of students towards home tasks. Simultaneously, five out of six authors agreed on the importance of preparation (elaboration) of teaching materials and knowledge evaluation.

Table 1 also shows that the aforementioned authors concentrated their attention on some aspects of the teaching process, disregarding other essential components.

The analysis of international experience in conducting the teaching quality evaluation surveys allowed the authors to improve contents of the student questionnaire. The experience of both the world's most prestigious universities and the ones aiming to reach the international level was involved.

Table 2

Key Results of the Student Survey[2]

Questionnaire section	Criteria	Positive evaluation (percentage)	Neutral evaluation (percentage)	Negative evaluation (percentage)
Personal traits	Speech culture	88.55		
	Respect for an audience	88.4		
	Appropriate outer appearance	87.87		
	Responsiveness	86		
	Punctuality	84.9		
	Good manners	84.59		
	The ability to control and discipline the audience	84.37		
Knowledge transfer by lecturers	Supplied with excessive workload		25.45	28.34
	Opposed different theories		30.73	
	Asked students about their goals		28.91	
	Introduced topics appropriately	87.71		
	Asked students about their learning interests			12.55
	Encouraged students to focus on their interests and goals		28.03	14.11
	Provided with appropriate practical examples	84.67		
	Explored learning issues fully	84.59		
	Ensured the required supply of literature and handout materials			11.41
	Offered different viewpoints to the learning issues		25.22	
	Inspired students for further reading		25.52	16.89
Knowledge evaluation	Offered students to evaluate themselves		31.46	23.39
	Asked students how they intend to achieve the goals and tasks set		29.67	19.74
	Offered students to share their ideas and knowledge			13.08
	Explained students why they were right or wrong			11.49
	Opened new learning opportunities		25.41	

The authors elaborated the student questionnaire that allows evaluating teachers and the teaching quality

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[2] Conducted in seven Latvian Universities (2009-2010).

by certain criteria. The questionnaire contained dichotomous questions divided into four groups: knowledge transfer, knowledge evaluation, accessibility of a teacher and his/her personal traits. The questionnaire was approbated and then used in seven Latvian universities. The research results are shown in Table 2.

The results show that Latvian students evaluate the teaching quality positively. This fact contradicts with the current quality level of the higher education in Latvia and suggests that students evaluate the teaching quality subjectively due to limited opportunities.

While analyzing the survey results, the authors focused their attentions on the negative evaluation of teaching (in order to explore new opportunities for improving the teaching quality).

Over 28% of students think that it is possible to fully meet course requirements set by a lecturer.

As anticipated, most of negative evaluations concern the "knowledge evaluation" section. For instance, over 11% of students are discontented with explanations that were given to justify evaluation of their knowledge. Over 23% of students assess their self-evaluation options negatively (in terms of the overall knowledge evaluation system).

The survey results clearly designate that there are plenty of education quality improvement opportunities.

Personal traits of a lecturer have an unexpectedly high influence on students' motivations and the learning processes. Therefore, in order to explore the students' potential and assist them in becoming independent and mature personalities, the lecturers have to put more emphasis on interaction with the students and progress personally.

Summing up personal qualities listed in the questionnaire, the surveyed students thought that lecturers should be good-tempered, understanding, punctual, tactful, intelligent, considerate, patient, fair, attentive, accurate, sociable, objective, creative, positive, sympathetic, talented, responsible, hard-working, forgiving, supportive and able to give an appropriate advice.

At the same time, the research showed that the students found unacceptable traits of a lecturer, such as rudeness, quick temper, nervousness, being reserved, susceptibility and indifference.

As a result of the conducted survey, the authors also identified a number of factors that can impact on survey results considerably. They are:

(1) The number of students in a target group;

(2) The amount of required information obtained during a survey;

(3) The number of years students have studied (e.g., first year or graduate students);

(4) The education level (Bachelor, Master or Ph.D. programme students);

(5) The survey goals (to obtain certain information about particular or general issues);

(6) The evaluation methodology, e.g., precise (in-class) evaluation or detailed (take-home) commentary;

(7) Timing of a questionnaire (at the beginning of a course—to clarify the background information or at the end—to draw conclusions);

(8) Clarity of the research subject;

(9) Single-use or multiple-use questionnaire;

(10) Means of information processing;

(11) Announcement of the survey results to all interested parties.

The unified survey helps to raise teachers' motivations in improving education level of students as well as their own professional level, at the same time, making students more aware and critical to the study process, teaching methods and a university as such. Elimination of indifference to the study process and the improved

feedback are the most favorable survey results. The academic staff must find out what exactly needs to be changed, what cannot be changed, what kind of changes have to be made to allocation of resources, teaching/learning materials, academic plan, etc., and conclude whether teachers are ready to change and improve themselves.

The analysis and the authors' experience gave a clear indication of the significant problem—in the post-Soviet states, the acquired results are not used efficiently even given the well-structured and effective system of the teaching quality evaluation. "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting it to come out different", said by Benjamin Franklin.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Researches

One of the most crucial factors in the system of teaching quality evaluation is the evaluation of teaching by students. Simultaneously, due to subjective nature of the students' evaluation, it can be regarded as an instrument enhancing feedback among universities, students and lecturers, whereas improvement of the teaching quality is a prerequisite. In order to determine the student's evaluations of teaching quality, it is more efficient to use a unified questionnaire and compare results across several universities. The key groups of criteria that should be included in a questionnaire are: knowledge transfer, knowledge evaluation, accessibility of a lecturer and his/her personal traits. The unified questionnaire can be modified for a particular university by adding a supplementary section based on students' answers to open questions. Relationships between students and teachers are the unexpectedly crucial component of the teaching quality evaluation. In most cases, the relationships are the main driver that motivates students strongly for studies, exploration of new materials and own researches. Despite of the fact that evaluation of one university lecturer concerns interests of all other lecturers, not everyone in teaching personnel gives considerable attention to this process and strives for positive results, whilst evaluation of the teaching personnel is capital-intensive and rather complex. The role of a student in this kind of evaluation is really significant provided that the applied methodology is efficient. Further research on this topic should consequently reveal differences in the evaluation of teaching by students with different educational backgrounds (for instance, at the Bachelor and Master levels).

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