

BUSINESS STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FAVOURITE AND EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTORS: DO THEY DIFFER?

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Introduction

In 1953, Dale Carnegie published one of the first modern 'self-help' books, entitled "How to win friends and influence people". The purpose of this note is to question whether Irish business students require their instructors to act on the precepts of Mr. Carnegie. Specifically, do they distinguish between the attributes of instructors that they like (favourites) and those that they perceive to be effective?

The quality of student learning and the effectiveness of teaching are ultimately unobservable, the learning process internal to the student, the teaching process a continually changing and evolving set of actions, and the interaction between them complex. Different students may perceive the same instructor as being effective and ineffective. A magnetic and outgoing personality may well, on its own, promote a learning atmosphere and thus lead to substantial student learning even though the technical effectiveness of the pedagogic process involved may not be high. Recognising this, this study does not attempt to investigate the extent or otherwise of student learning processes. Instead, it looks at what students perceive as being the attributes of effective and popular instructors.

Previous Research

Research in the 1970s by Gurney (1977) indicated that students place a high value on the human and process elements of teaching, not just on the information content. Abrami *et al.* (1982) show that students respond not just to the content but also to the personality of the instructor. Other studies (Cohen 1981, Murray *et al.* 1990, and Centra 1977) also indicate that students judge their instructors' ability to communicate the material on the basis of personality issues as well as on the basis of the instructors' professional ability. These studies have amounted to little more than assertion that there is correlation, the causal implication being unsaid.

Gibbs (1992) defines some of the attributes of good teaching as including: providing interesting and stimulating instruction; encouragement of students independence; maintaining a respectful attitude to students; provision of high quality and rapid feedback on student work; and the fostering of active learning methods.

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A major study by Atamian and Ganguli (1993) threw up a number of interesting findings. They surveyed accounting majors, finding that in general, those surveyed distinguished between effective and popular instructors. This discrimination was stronger in male rather than female students. Male and female students used the same attributes to describe effective instructors, and use the same set to define favourite instructors (different attribute sets overall of course, given the overall finding). This study forms the basis of the present work

Methodology

Three distinct groups of business students were surveyed.

The first group was MBA students. It is interesting to note that no MBA student actually ticked the identity box and as such it is not possible identify MBA Students as such.

The second group was students pursuing an evening degree in Business and Information Technology, all over the age of 23 and in full-time employment. The third group was full-time undergraduate Business students, in age lying typically between 19 and 21 and almost all availing of fee waivers from government. Each student was given one of two forms.

Form A asked students to recall their (unnamed) favourite instructor, and to mark those 5 attributes that they felt best defined this person and whether they considered this person to have also been the most effective instructor. Form B asked students to indicate the attributes that best described the person that they remembered as being their most effective instructor and whether they considered this person to have been their favourite. The attribute set was generated by reference to previous studies, by reference to Gibbs and by a series of discussions with experienced colleagues. Effective was defined as the person from whom they felt they had learned the most. This definition is in line with the aim and scope of the study, focusing as it does on the student's perceptions. 106 completed form A and 108 form B was returned.

Table 1 shows summary details of the student body, broken down by sex, form filled in, degree year and type and previous educational attainment.

TABLE 1: Distribution of Responses

Gender	Male		Female	
	Most Effective	Most Popular	Most Effective	Most Popular
Total	48	46	58	62
Penultimate Year	23	20	27	32
Final Year	25	26	31	31
Evening Student	15	12	8	14
Day Student	33	34	50	49

Maintained Hypotheses

Based on the research above on previous faculty studies of students, and by induction from experience, a number of hypotheses may be advanced.

1. Ho 1: Students assign the same attributes set to favourite and effective instructors.
2. Ho 2/3: Male / Female students assign the same attribute set to favourite and effective instructors
3. Ho 4/5: Male and Female students assign the same attribute set to favourite/ effective instructors
4. Ho 6/7: Students in different years of college assign the same attribute set to favourite/ effective instructors
5. Ho 8/9: Full-time and Part-time Students assign the same attribute set to favourite/ effective instructors
6. Ho 10/11: Students with different prior academic records assign the same attribute set to favourite/ effective instructors

Data Analyses

Preliminary analysis of the data indicates the following patterns.

Looking at Table 2 we see that while there is a general tendency to identify favourite and effective instructors as identical, this is not a homogeneous relationship. Males are more likely to identify the favourite instructor as the most effective than to see the effective instructor as favourite, while in females the direction of this relationship is reversed. In all other cases listed below, the inclination is more for students to see the favourite as effective than vice versa.

TABLE 2: Breakdown of Favourite = Effective / Effective = Favourite.

Gender	Was the most effective instructor also your favourite ?	Was your favourite instructor also the most effective ?
Male	66.67%	84.78%
Female	70.69%	62.90%
Low Previous Grades	73.53%	76.27%
High Previous Grades	60.53%	69.70%
Daytime Students	72.29%	73.17%
Penultimate Year	68.00%	74.50%
Final Year	69.60%	70.18%
All Respondents	68.87%	72.22%

In terms of the actual attribute perceived by students, table 3 shows the distribution.

TABLE 3: Attributes attributed to Favourite and Effective instructor, ranked by grand total.

Attribute	FAVOURITE		EFFECTIVE		Grand Total	%
	Total	%	Total	%		
1. 05 Is enthusiastic and energetic about teaching the subject matter	51	48.1%	62	57.4%	113	52.8%
2. 04 Is an effective communicator	44	40.7%	53	49.1%	97	45.3%
3. 14 Delivers interesting and informative lectures	39	36.1%	53	49.1%	92	43.0%
4. 07 Is creative and capable of making the subject enjoyable	37	34.3%	32	29.6%	69	32.2%
5. 11 Incorporates relevant practical examples in lectures and classes	35	32.4%	31	28.7%	66	30.8%
6. 09 Has a sense of humour	32	29.6%	20	18.5%	52	24.3%
7. 06 Is readily available outside the classroom setting	23	21.3%	27	25.0%	50	23.4%
8. 03 Encourages student questioning and class participation	24	22.2%	23	21.3%	47	22.0%
9. 10 Is organised during class periods	17	15.7%	19	17.6%	36	16.8%
10. 18 Presents lectures at a comfortable pace	20	18.5%	15	13.9%	35	16.4%
11. 38 Clearly signals the content of examinations	20	18.5%	15	13.9%	35	16.4%
12. 01 Is understanding of Student needs	17	15.7%	15	13.9%	32	15.0%
13. 31 Provides prompt feedback on student assignments, examinations and quizzes	16	14.8%	12	11.1%	28	13.1%
14. 08 Is polite patient and friendly	11	10.2%	14	13.0%	25	11.7%
15. 13 Is unbiased, objective and fair minded in presentation of argument	10	9.3%	13	12.0%	23	10.7%
16. 21 Is clear about expectations from students	8	7.4%	15	13.9%	23	10.7%
17. 28 Promotes a learning atmosphere in class	14	13.0%	8	7.4%	22	10.3%
18. 26 Provides examinations on areas that are covered by the textbook	8	7.4%	10	9.3%	18	8.4%

Table 3 / continued overleaf

TABLE 3 continued

Attribute	FAVOURITE		EFFECTIVE		Grand Total	%
	Total	%	Total	%		
19. 02 Encourages students to be competitive, goal orientated, and successful.	8	7.4%	9	8.3%	17	7.9%
20. 25 Relates class issues to personal experience	13	12.0%	4	3.7%	17	7.9%
21. 20 Is always in control of the class	11	10.2%	5	4.6%	16	7.5%
22. 15 Makes students feel self-confident and important	9	8.3%	6	5.6%	15	7.0%
23. 12 Has a professional manner	7	6.5%	7	6.5%	14	6.5%
24. 16 Is challenging and demanding	4	3.7%	10	9.3%	14	6.5%
25. 23 Is good natured	9	8.3%	5	4.6%	14	6.5%
26. 35 Readily admits if wrong or unsure of an answer	4	3.7%	8	7.4%	12	5.6%
27. 22 Assigns substantial homework and assignments	5	4.6%	5	4.6%	10	4.7%
28. 36 Strictly follows the course syllabus	1	0.9%	9	8.3%	10	4.7%
29. 39 Assumes a good knowledge of previous courses and builds on them	6	5.6%	3	2.8%	9	4.2%
30. 34 Postpones assessments if students are not ready	4	3.7%	4	3.7%	8	3.7%
31. 17 Respects the opinions of others	2	1.9%	4	3.7%	6	2.8%
32. 12 Has a professional manner	2	1.9%	2	1.9%	4	1.9%
33. 30 Insists on students being prepared in class	2	1.9%	2	1.9%	4	1.9%
34. 32 Gives regular spot quizzes	1	0.9%	2	1.9%	3	1.4%
35. 24 Is self confident	1	0.9%	1	0.9%	2	0.9%
36. 29 Emphasises discipline in study and class habits	0	0.0%	2	1.9%	2	0.9%
37. 27 Praises good students in class	0	0.0%	1	0.9%	1	0.5%
38. 19 Promotes ethical behaviour	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
39. 37 Criticises students that are ill prepared for class	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
40. 40 Has a clean, neat appearance	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

Note: Attributes numbered as per their position in the questionnaire.

Some interesting preliminary points arise from a perusal of the distribution of responses.

There is some evidence of induced response bias as the distribution of responses (grand total) seems to be concentrated in the first half of the attribute set. Further work should perhaps scramble any attribute location.

Atamian & Ganguli (1993) found a high premium placed by students on Understanding of Student Needs, Encouragement Of Goal Orientation and Encouragement Of Student Class Participation, ranking them 1–2–3 in that order. These elements are not highly ranked here.

In terms of the relative ranking of attributes as between favourite and effective instructors, there is a remarkable degree of conformity, lending weight to and providing evidence of internal consistency with the students perception of favourite instructors as effective and vice versa. Of the top ten overall attributes, there is very little difference in the relative rankings as between the two subgroups. Attributes 10 and 1 (surprisingly) are the only top ten overall that do not appear in the top ten attributes of favourite instructors, and they tie for eleventh rank. The top ten for effective instructors and the top ten overall are the same set with very the same ranking, albeit with a high number of ties. This seems to indicate that Irish students are not very effective at discriminating between favourite and effective instructors.

Students seem both uninterested and unimpressed by lecturers that promote ethical behaviour or who criticise unprepared students. An alternative explanation may however be that these actions are never undertaken and as such students may not have any frame of reference into which to place what are in effect hypothetical attributes.

The hypotheses adduced above were analysed by means of a chi-square analysis, the details of which are given below. Yates' correction for continuity was used, both to correct for the small sample sizes in some cases and the theoretical problem that the chi-squared distribution is a continuous distribution and is here being applied to discrete data.

Based on the data below we can reject all but the first, fifth, sixth, seventh and eleventh hypotheses. The implications are:

- Students do use the same attribute set to identify favoured and effective instructors (Ho1), confirmatory of what was found in Table 2
- They use the same set irrespective of gender in evaluating effective instructors (Ho5)
- They use the same set irrespective of their standing in college in evaluating effective and favoured instructors (Ho6 and Ho7)
- They use the same set for evaluation of effective instructors (but not it should be noted favoured instructors) regardless of their previous grade experience (Ho11)

TABLE 3: χ^2 testing

Null Hypothesis	Calculated χ^2
Ho 1: Students assign the same attributes set to favourite and effective instructors.	38.7372
Ho 2: Male students assign the same attribute set to favourite and effective instructors	82.1482 ***
Ho 3: Female students assign the same attribute set to favourite and effective instructors	135.20***
Ho 4: Male and Female students assign the same attribute set to favourite instructors	53.5125 ***
Ho 5: Male and Female students assign the same attribute set to effective instructors	32.9082
Ho 6: Students in different years of college assign the same attribute set to favourite instructors	31.7968
Ho 7: Students in different years of college assign the same attribute set to effective instructors	38.2385
Ho 8: Full-time and Part-time Students assign the same attribute set to favourite instructors	70.8320***
Ho 9: Full-time and Part-time Students assign the same attribute set to effective instructors	61.1296***
Ho 10: Students with high and low grade experiences assign the same attribute set to favourite instructors	135.60***
Ho 11: Students with high and low grades experiences assign the same attribute set to effective instructors	29.4602

*/ **/ *** Significant at 10% / 5% / 1%

These responses are not strong, in that we do not have any evidence as to the strength, or even the direction, of the relationship. What we can say is that there appears, or not, to be a relationship. The implications for pedagogy are important and serious.

First, there would seem to be a need to work on the popularity aspects of the teaching delivery experience for students – this seems to be the way to having a perceived high degree of effectiveness.

Second, there is uncertainty regarding how this occurs in individual gender subgroups, implying perhaps that the gender dynamics of classes are an important mitigating variable.

Third, there is no evidence that fast tracking or selecting students with previous higher performance will result in an increase in perceived effectiveness.

Directions for future research

Is it true?:

The main issue that we have seen here is that there is some evidence that Irish business students see, by contrast to some international evidence, no major difference between popular and effective instructors. This hypothesis needs to be much more closely investigated, perhaps along the lines below.

Data reduction / Meta attributes:

There are 40 different attributes noted above, culled from a number of surveys. These seem to be prima facie an adequate set of attributes. However, two issues arise. First, for any individual, managing 40 personal attributes may be impossible. Therefore, data reduction techniques may be useful to see if these 40 can be reduced to a more manageable set. If a statistically and meaningful (personal and pedagogical) set can be extracted then the hypotheses above need to be examined with regard to these reduced sets. Second, the attributes themselves are imposed from above in this study – a more useful approach may be to allow the respondents to themselves dictate the attributes. This would be time consuming but would have the twin advantages of certainty that the attribute set was as complete as could be gotten and potentially allowing qualitative data analysis as a further methodological approach.

More data:

Regardless of the above, more data are required. The dataset above is small and therefore allows little in the way of detailed cross tabulations to be extracted such that these cross tabulations are open to statistical evaluation. Counter pointing this is the fact of the small number of possible candidates for evaluation – there are only so many bodies in any class. A potential way to overcome this is

Cross college and cross faculty data:

This would allow for both an increased dataset and for potentially meaningful evaluation of interesting differences amongst the student body.

Linkage to individual attributes:

Ultimately the data here are recordings of perceptions. Individual psychological attributes undoubtedly play a major part in these perceptions, as well as the group psychology of the class under instruction. There is a body of evidence that links learning style indicators to success in various methods of examination, and to a lesser extent to the student's preferences as to teaching strategies. Examples of this work include Filbeck and Smith (1996) and Campbell and David (1990). Evaluation of the extent to which students with different learning styles, as defined by psychological research,

differ as regards their perceptions of effective and popular instructors would be interesting, as would be the underlying psychological linkages that could be made.

Does it matter?:

We have ultimately a concern, it is supposed, to give students a set of skills, content and generic, that will equip them for life outside the university surroundings. A follow up study, linking these students to their final grades and beyond to work experiences, may be useful. Analysis of individual lecturers, self and student perceptions of their effectiveness, and grades achieved would also be useful.

Conclusion

Irish business students seem to require us to win them over as friends before we may influence them. This is in contrast to at least some studies. More research needs to be done however to allow definite conclusions to be drawn regarding moderating our classroom environments.

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